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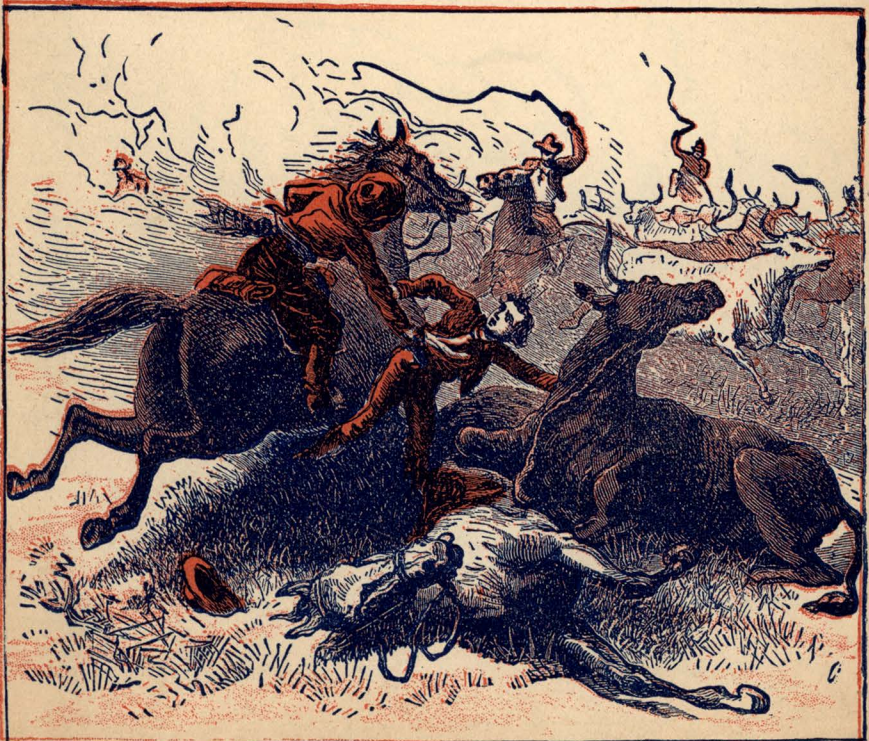
M. J. IVERS & CO., Publishers,
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Vol. I.

THE PRAIRIE-RANCH. Or THE YOUNG CATTLE HERDERS.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.



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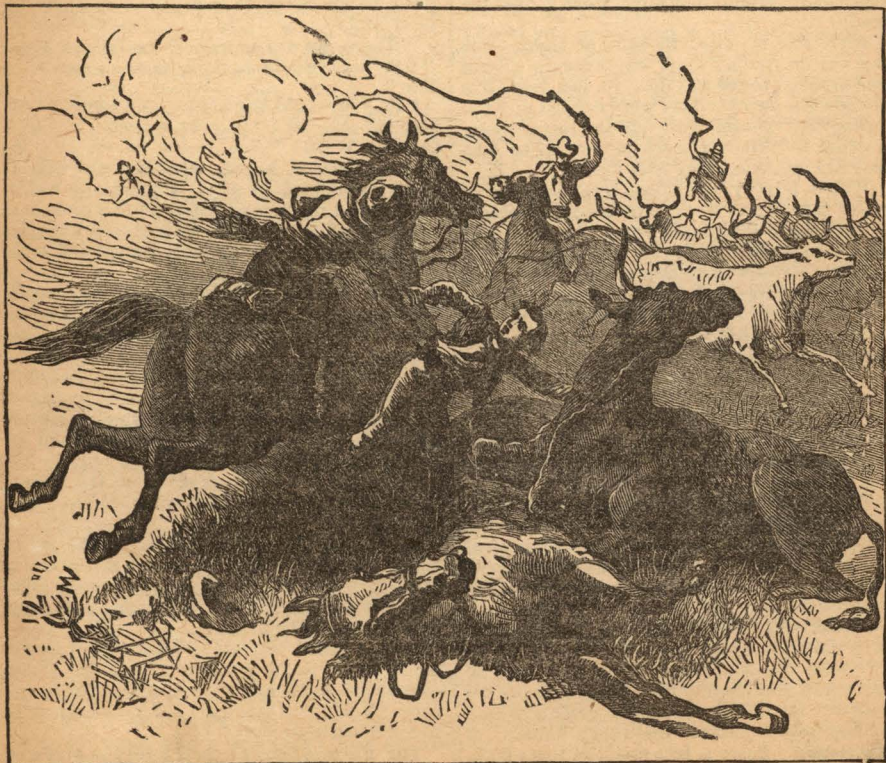
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Vol. I.

THE PRAIRIE RANCH: Or THE YOUNG CATTLE HERDERS.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.



HE BENT LOW IN THE SADDLE, MAKING A SURE GRASP AT THE LAD'S BELT. AND THEN, WITH A SUPERHUMAN EFFORT, ROSE ERECT, BEARING WITH HIM HIS COUSIN, THUS DEXTROUSLY SNATCHED FROM ALMOST CERTAIN DEATH.

The Prairie Ranch;

OR, The Young Cattle Herders.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I. THE STOCK FARM.

"WHAT under the sun!"

With which exclamation the two lads sat bolt upright in bed, staring blankly at the narrow, barred window, through which came the diabolical alarm that had so unceremoniously cut short their sweet sleep.

A hoarse, discordant braying—a series of explosive grunts and snorts, the like of which neither of the "city boys" had ever heard before; then the huge, crooked cows-horn was loosened, and a round, good-natured face was visible at the glassless opening.

"Turn out, boys! don't you hear the breakfast bell?" and once more the battered old horn sent forth a trumpet that might have roused the dead.

There was no more thought of sleep. The day was dawning. Time was precious. There was so much to see and do. In less than five minutes the two brothers were dressed and following their cousin Walt into the eating-room. As they breakfast, a word or two as to who they are and what they look like.

Walter Harvey, the eldest, is the only son of one of the largest stock growers in Colorado. His mother died within a year of his birth, and since then—now nearly two-score years—the foot of a white woman has never crossed that threshold. People call Frank Harvey a misogynist, because he will not take another woman to fill the place left vacant by his idolized wife. Outwardly he is cold and stern, but his heart is as sore and tender as it was that day so long ago, when he laid his fair young wife beneath the sod. Only Walt knows what a wealth of love is hidden beneath that cold exterior, and he is proud of his father as the father is of his son.

Tall, stout built, yet active as a panther, Walt is a proficient in every manly sport and accomplishment of the plains; has had a good common school education; is fairly good-looking, and has a bold, manly carriage, learned in Nature's school.

Arthur and Ross Duncan are brothers, who have come to spend the autumn and winter with their cousin. They are fair specimens of city youth, and though this is their first visit west of the Mississippi, their greenness will quickly vanish before the rough breath of experience. There is true metal in them both,

and Walt Harvey is just the boy to bring it out.

They had arrived at the ranch near the middle of the night before, after a long and wearisome ride behind a mule team which conveyed their baggage, and with a brief greeting, had tumbled into bed, nor moved a limb until aroused by the unearthly serenade at their window. Hence all was new and strange to them this morning, and everything was eyed with interest.

The long, low-ceiled room, with its mud-colored walls and floor; the clothless table of elbow-polished oak; the rude benches which ran along the sides of the board and served as chairs; the Mexican man-cook; the manifold wagons and articles of horse furniture hanging upon the walls—all had their turn of curious inspection.

"Eaten enough?" asked Walt, as the brother refused a fresh supply. "All right; we'll go and take a look at the colts. I picked out a dozen or so, and put them in the little corral, where they'll be handy. You can look them over and take your choice. You'll need a good, tough horse to carry you through tomorrow."

"There, we are in time!" exclaimed Ross. "Art, here, would have it that we were too late."

"So you would have been, only I insisted on keeping one herd for your especial benefit," laughed Walt. "The rodeo, as we call it, Mexican fashion, began yesterday, and will be about wound up to day. I knew you would be too tired for much hard work this morning, and you will be all the better prepared to enjoy the fun, if you get thoroughly acquainted with your nags to-day."

While speaking Walt led the way to a small inclosure formed of stout rails, and letting down the bars, motioned his cousins to enter, himself following them.

"A neat lot, if I do say it," and Walt nodded approvingly as the high-spirited colts retreated as far as the fence would allow, then faced the intruders, snorting and pawing the ground as in defiance. "Any one of them will do his mile in three minutes, fresh from the grass. Look there once, and take your choice. I'll stir them up."

In silence the brothers watched the noble animals as they rushed to and fro at the crack of Harvey's whip. A choice was indeed difficult, but Arthur selected a dappled gray, and Ross chose a jetty black.

"All right!" laughed Walt. "Now, we'll see how they perform under the saddle. Come over to the stable and have a look at the furniture. You'll find it a little different from that in use down your way."

For the first time in their lives the brothers

The Prairie Ranch.

looked upon a genuine Mexican or Californian saddle, a startling contrast to the flat, English saddle upon which they had learned to ride.

The pommel was six inches above the seat, and surmounted by a flat, circular disk, three inches in diameter. The cantle was nearly as high. The saddle-tree was heavy and stout, covered with tightly-stretched raw-hide. Over this was slipped a huge cover of sole-leather, beautifully stamped in red and black, and richly ornamented with silver-headed nails. The stirrups were oblong blocks of wood, about six inches by four, and three in thickness. Over these hung stamped leather *tappadoes*, to protect the feet from mud and thorns. The whole affair would weigh from twenty-five to thirty pounds.

The bridle was no less a curiosity to the boys. The head-stall was all of braided horse-hair. The bit was without a joint, and in the center was doubled back so as to form a long letter U. A half-circle of iron was fastened to the arms of the bit, which closely encircled the lower jaw of the horse. The ends of the bit drop several inches below the nose of the horse, and a light but stout steel chain, which serves for reins, is secured to each end. By pulling upon the reins, the doubled portion of the bit forces the mouth of the horse open. While the iron ring compresses its lower jaw, so that with little exertion a rider can break his horse's jaw.

"That is the principal thing for you to bear in mind," added Walt. "You must ride with a light hand. The faintest pressure will stop a bridle-wise horse—if you pull too hard, he will throw himself over backward, running the risk of breaking his own and your neck to save his jaw."

"I don't see why you use such cruel jaw-breakers, then," observed Arthur.

"It's mostly habit, I suppose. A common curb-bit would almost always serve the purpose. Come on, I am going to rope your horses. I want you to see how we fasten on the saddle."

Walt entered the corral and quickly separated the dapple-gray from the rest and lassoed it. The moment the noose closed around its neck, the creature, from appearing the wildest of the wild, became as staid and quiet as an old hack.

"He hasn't forgotten the lesson I gave him this last spring," smiled Walt. "It cost me full half a day to break him in, but I didn't begrudge the trouble."

Leading the horse outside, he placed a soft sheepskin upon its back, then flung on the saddle. The girth was of horse-hair, a foot wide, and three feet long, with a stout iron ring in either end, one of which was already fastened to a stout strap. Raising the free end of the girth, or *cincho*, to give it the local name, Walt

slipped the end of a strap through the ring, then through a smaller ring attached to the saddle, repeating the act until the strap was three double. He drew the *cincho* as tight as he could, then passed the end of the strap through the upper ring, from the *inside*, upon the right hand. Next he passed the strap under the ring, from the *outside*, on the left hand, passing the loose end through the loop thus formed and drawing it tight. With this fastening, the girth cannot give or become loose, since the greater the strain upon it the tighter the knot is drawn.

Slipping on the bridle, Walt vaulted into the saddle without touching the stirrup. The bridle chains hung loose, and he put the gray through its paces by the pressure of his knees, the swaying of his body and an occasional word of command.

"He is perfect—take my place, Art," said Walt, dismounting. "Mind—a light hand and a firm seat."

Arthur mounted, but could not adjust his feet to suit him. He looked toward Walt, who was smothering a laugh.

"I knew you would find it out for yourself. Right there lies the great difference between an English saddle and ours. You sit *upon* a flat saddle, while you sit *in* ours. You are used to ride with stirrups hung three inches before the center of your saddle, while these are hung precisely in the middle. If you ride a flat saddle, and your horse gives an unexpected side leap, you cannot help losing your balance, to a certain degree, because your seat only braces you against a forward leap. With this, you are guarded against *every* shock, expected or not. Straighten your legs, just as though you were standing upon solid ground—so!"

By closely following their cousin's advice, the brothers, long before noon, felt perfectly at home in the new saddle, and expressed themselves ready for the next day's work.

They were just leaving the stable, for dinner, when there came the rapid clatter of hoofs, then a wild ringing yell.

"Hurra! now you *will* see some fun!" cried Walt, his eyes sparkling. "That's the *buckaroo*!"

CHAPTER II. THE "BUCKARO."

Wondering who or what the "*buckaroo*" could be, Arthur and Ross Duncan followed the eager steps of their cousin from the stable to the front entrance of the long, low, rambling ranch. It must be something far beyond the ordinary run of things that so excited Walt Harvey.

"There! that's him—and you can't find his equal between the two oceans!" muttered Walt, his eyes aglow with enthusiasm.

A fine-looking black mustang, dripping with perspiration stood before the door. Its rider sat with one leg thrown carelessly over the high pommel, lighting a cigar at a coal handed him by the obsequiously bowing Mexican cook. A dashing, *debonair* looking fellow, whose gaudy dress well matched his lithe, graceful figure—graceful and picturesque even in that careless attitude.

"If he'd only 'buck' now!" muttered Ross, who, after so much horse-talk, naturally enough imagined that *buckaro* was, or had something to do with a bucking-horse. "It'd be good as a circus to see that dandified fellow play leap-frog from the saddle."

Just as though the black mustang heard and understood this whispered wish, it gave a sudden sidelong leap, followed up by a swift succession of perpendicular jumps and furious plunges such as few horsemen could have successfully baffled.

Walt laughed triumphantly. The brothers stared in speechless amazement.

The rider actually appeared unconscious that his horse was doing anything out of the way. Only one foot rested in the stirrup, the other leg thrown carelessly around the pommel. The bridle chains were untouched. His whole mind was apparently given to the proper lighting of his cigar. The wild, eccentric cavorting of his horse did not stir his seat a hair's breadth, more than if he had been glued into the saddle. It was a splendid exhibition of skill, all the more impressive from its being, apparently, wholly unmediated.

Satisfied with his light, the horseman flung aside the coal, and then, seemingly, became aware of the presence of the three young men for the first time. Swift as thought, his right foot sought the stirrup, and the black mustang stood before the cousins motionless, as though cast in bronze, while the rider doffed his broad sombrero and bowed low in the saddle.

"Glad to see you, Pedrillo," cried Walt, clasping the long brown hand in his own. "Been expecting you for two hours and more. Better late than never, though."

"I had to ride over to Senor Gordon's this morning; that made me late," was the response, in a low, but remarkably clear and musical, voice. "You have a little job for me?"

"A big job, rather," laughed Walt. "If you do it in less than three hours, you can take my bat. Light, and turn your horse to the fodder. We'll have a bite of dinner before tackling old Man-eater."

While the Mexican—for such was Pedrillo—was following his advice, Walt gave his cousins a brief and hasty explanation.

The *buckaro* is a professional horse-breaker, generally a Mexican or Texan. His principal

business is breaking and training wild and unruly animals for the less skillful or more busy among the stock-raisers and traders. There is no animal so wild and vicious that he dare not mount it, and once mounted, the creature must yield or die. Another branch of his trade is the picking up of unruly horses or ponies, at a merely nominal price, to be broken, carefully trained, and then sold at a profitable figure. The *buckaro* is a king of the saddle in more senses than one. He is welcome wherever he goes, and a favorite with all, rich and poor. He is the postman and news-carrier of the vast cattle-ranges.

Pedrillo did not appear to as good advantage upon foot as in the saddle. Constant riding, almost from birth, had stunted and bowed his legs. His walk was a shuffling shamle, like one just recovering from a slight touch of paralysis. But this did not lessen the unspoken admiration of the cousins. His every word was listened to with respect, and his wants at the table carefully anticipated.

His dress was that peculiar to his people, only more costly than the generality, for Pedrillo had made a fortune in his business, and the bank of a Mexican is his back and belly. A glazed, gold-banded sombrero; an embroidered and spangled jacket of rich crimson velvet, open from the throat and barely reaching his waist; two shirts, the inner of the finest muslin, the other of sky-blue silk, both richly embroidered; a china crape sash around his middle, knotted at the right side, and supporting a long, slender knife and brace of pistols; scarlet velvetene breeches with buttons of gold and silver; heavy Texan leggins of buckskin, thickly beaded, wrapped tightly around the legs and tied with a thong, just below the knee, *not* buttoned; short boots of stamped leather; huge spurs with rowels over three inches in diameter.

A long, narrow face of the color of smoked bacon; deep-set eyes; long, thin nose; a straight slit for a mouth; a long but sparse pair of mustaches and pointed beard; combine these items, and you have Pedrillo, the famous *buckaro*.

Immediately after dinner Walt led the way to a small corral, the walls of which were of unusual height and strength. There was but one animal inside—a large, magnificently-formed iron-gray stallion, that constantly circled round the fence as though seeking an opening for escape.

"He keeps that up night and day," began Walt, when, as though infuriated by the sound of his voice, the stallion flung itself against the fence, pawing and striking with its hoofs, screaming most viciously.

"I'll need both saddle and bridle to tame him," was the quiet remark made by Pedrillo. "We'll need three lassoes besides mine."

"All right. I kept one man besides the cook. Come along, boys. You'll see more of the fun on horseback."

By the time Arthur and Ross had their mustangs saddled and bridled, all was in readiness for the battle of man against horse.

Walt stood by the bars of the corral, ready to let them down and give the wild stallion egress. Twenty yards beyond, Pedrillo was waiting; further on were his two assistants.

Pedrillo nodded. Walt flung down the three upper bars, then sprung into the saddle, barely in time.

With a wild, piercing scream, the stallion cleared the remaining bars, but ere he could taste the sweets of liberty the snake-like coils of Pedrillo's lasso settled over his head; a vicious *pluck*—and the desert king was thrown upon his back in the dust.

At the same instant Walt and the servants spurred forward and made their casts. Each lasso closed around a leg, and being drawn taut, the horse was unable even to struggle.

Dismounting, Pedrillo caught up the extra saddle and bridle which lay in readiness, and approached the fallen king. At a sign, his well trained mustang leaned hard against the lasso, forcing the stallion to open his mouth to escape suffocation. With swift dexterity Pedrillo inserted the bit and buckled the head-stall, then wound his sash tightly around the animal's eyes. Waving his hand, the lassoes were gradually slackened, and the blinded stallion struggled to his feet. With some difficulty the saddle was strapped upon the animal's back, and Pedrillo sprang lightly into his seat. The three men closed in, and their slackened lassoes were quickly kicked off by the prancing stallion. Walt loosened the lasso from the saddle of Pedrillo's horse, and the *buckaro* drew this in, fastening the loose end around his waist. All being in readiness, he tore off the blinding sash.

The stallion crouched low to the ground, with a shrill scream—then the air seemed full of flying hoofs and gleaming teeth. But Pedrillo met each attempt at biting with a heavy kick until the animal's mouth was covered with blood. Baffled in this, the stallion flung itself upon one side, rolling over and over, but Pedrillo was not to be caught napping, and the moment the mad beast arose, he was settled firmly in the saddle.

With an almost human scream of rage, the stallion wheeled and sped toward the fence of the corral, no doubt hoping to free itself by crushing its rider against the heavy rails. Then the brothers were given a proof of the terrible powers of the Mexican bit.

The *buckaro* gave a short, sharp jerk. The stallion reared upright, then, madly pawing the air, fell heavily over backward. The Mexican, cat-like, alighted upon his feet, clear of the

falling animal. For nearly a minute the creature lay trembling, the breath driven from its body by the terrible shock, but the moment it scrambled to its feet the *buckaro* was in the saddle.

Thus far, Pedrillo had contented himself with baffling the struggles of the stallion, but now his tactics changed. Spurs and lasso were used freely, the rawhide coils falling heavily in swiftly succeeding blows. The horse plunged furiously here and there, its changes being so rapid that the eye could scarcely follow them. Twice the animal was thrown upon its back by means of the jaw-breaking bit, yet no sooner did it arise, than the fierce contest was renewed with unabated fury.

But, after nearly an hour of this hot work, the stallion gave a piercing scream and darted away over the plain like an arrow fresh from its bow.

"It's all right now!" exclaimed Walt, with a long breath. "That's the beginning of the end. The brute will run until it falls, either dead or thoroughly broken."

"It was exciting to look at," said Arthur, thoughtfully, "but it is barbarous, after all."

"But it's the only way an aged horse can be thoroughly broken without a great waste of time. Come! let's take a breather over the prairie."

CHAPTER III. THE RODEA.

LONG before the stars were through twinkling, Arthur and Ross Duncan were awakened by a repetition of the particularly disagreeable serenade with which their first day at the stock-farm had been ushered in. And then the cheery voice of Walt Harvey cried aloud:

"Tumble out, boys! There's just time to swallow a bit and sup before we must take the saddle."

No more was needed. The brothers jumped out of bed and into their clothes, through the eating-room and out into the cool, frosty air where cousin Walt was breaking the ice and dipping water from a huge barrel into the two horse-buckets which he set before the boys, saying:

"Ram your head and arms into that. It's the only medicine we need or use on this ranch."

Obedience required no little courage on that cold, frosty morning, but the boys had resolved to do as those around them did, let the cost be what it might, and after the first icy shock, they felt fairly grateful to Walt. It was as though fresh blood had been infused into their veins. They were full of life and all aglow from head to foot.

But a few minutes were spent at the table. All, both men and boys, were too eager for the sport ahead for them to waste the moments un-

necessarily. Thus, half an hour from the discordant braying of Walt's horn, he, the brothers, the *duckaro*, the cook and four herdsmen—two of whom had been sent by Mr. Harvey to assist the youngsters in their "rounding up"—were in the saddle and galloping briskly over the prairie.

Neither Ross nor Arthur had much to say, simply because they had their hands full. Their mounts were overflowing with life and spirits, and though the boys had not forgotten Walt's instructions, their hands were too heavy upon the jaw-breaking bits. And to one accustomed to the English method of sitting upon a horse—well back in the saddle, with the stirrups a full foot in advance of the center line of the body—it requires time for one to grow used to the Mexican seat.

Cousin Walt rode between them, and his tongue was rarely idle. Much good advice and valuable hints did he give them, together with some interesting information, a portion of which, for the better understanding of what is to follow, may be given here, in a condensed form.

Mr. Harvey and two other men, whose cattle-ranges formed a huge triangle, had formed a sort of confederation for mutual as well as individual good. If one required help, the others assisted him. Their cattle and stock mingled together at will. Twice each year there was a grand inspection. In the fall of the year, a *rodeo* was ordered; that is, everybody turned out to drive up the cattle, to corral and identify them; to mark the calves and brand such of the stock as had escaped at the last gathering. In the spring, another *rodeo* was called, for the purpose of branding the calves marked in the fall.

As this arrangement was copied after that most in vogue among the Californian stock-growers, the confederates also made use of the technical terms employed by them, which example will be followed in this series.

"Until you get the hang of the thing, you fellows want to watch us, instead of going in on your own hook," said Walt, impressively. "Our Texas long-horns are not much like the cattle you have in the States. When they take a notion to go, go they will, if it is through a stone wall. The only thing that will cow them is a whip; and not always that."

As he spoke, Walt swung the long lash forward, with an almost imperceptible twist of his wrist. A crack like that of a heavily-loaded pistol followed, and the cook, with a little yell of amazement, jerked his head back so suddenly that his sombrero fell to the ground. A little shower of sparks betrayed the truly dextrous feat. Riding in a gallop the young ranchero had plucked the cigar from between the cook's lips with the lash of his whip.

Stooping low, Walt picked up the hat and handed it, together with a fresh cigar, to the cook, then resumed his position between the brothers.

"You see now why I ask you to keep out of the thick. When you learn to handle a whip like that—when you can put the cracker within an inch or two of the spot you aim at, every time, then you have nothing to fear from the long-horns. You can ride through and through the wildest herd that ever lived. But to-day you must promise me that you will keep out of the ruck. To give you a fair specimen of the work, I kept out one of the wildest herds of the whole range."

"Don't be uneasy," and Arthur laughed a little shortly. "We'll have our hands full learning how to manage with these *blessed* saddles and jaw-breakers, without playing bull-fight."

Despite the annoyance and positive discomfort caused by the—to them—awkward saddle and bridle, the brothers really enjoyed that wild scamper through the early morning. The air was so keen and pure, their horses so full of life and vigor, dashing through the frost-stiffened grass, up and down the gentle slopes, snorting, tossing their long manes and enjoying the frolic quite as much as their riders. The man who does not feel better and purer for such a mad scamper, is too good for this world.

The sun was just clearing the eastern swells, when the cattle were sighted, some feeding, some reposing on the long slope of the hill. Without a word the *duckaro*, who was in the lead, bore sharply to the left and swept on to guard against the cattle breaking away, tail on end, in the direction contrary to that in which they were to be driven.

"Now mind," hurriedly cried Walt, as they sped along, "I'll put you in position, and you must wait until we give the word and charge in. Don't crowd them too close, and be ready to wheel either side, in case any of the brutes should take a notion to charge you. You can dodge them easy enough, if you keep a cool head."

Walt stationed Ross first, then, nearly a hundred yards further on, he left Arthur, spurting on to secure his own position.

The cattle were now upon the alert, crowding together, clashing horns and hoofs, lowing uneasily, snorting and pawing the ground. Thus the main body. Others, generally bulls, with an occasional rampant steer, were scattered around, their flanks like skirmishers, with tails erect, with hair bristling the wrong way, their eyes aglow, the personification of fiery rage or sullen fury.

Arthur and Ross eyed them with anything but easy composure. It looked like a serious task, for nine men to drive two hundred such horned and hairy brutes.

Not so with the experienced herder. Walt sounded his horn, and yelling, hooting, screaming like so many lunatics, they charge the herd, their short-handled, long-lashed whips, sending forth a never-ending volley of pistol-cracks.

The cattle crowded closer, those outside seeking to climb over those next them, lowing and routing like mad. Then the daring horsemen were upon them, plying their whips with merciless skill. Each touch of the seasoned raw-hide cracker cut out a bit of skin as neatly as though with a knife. A gaunt, brindle bull, stung to madness by the stinging lash, wheeled sharply upon the *buckaro* with an unearthly bellow. But an old stager was before him. The trained mustang leaped swiftly aside, and with a backward sweep, Pedrillo split open the bull's nose with his whip. Again and again the blow was repeated, swifter far than the eye could follow the motions, and then, thoroughly cowed, the bull, with a loud roar of pain and terror, turned and thundered down the slope.

Like magic all resistance ceased, and the entire herd followed his lead. At Walt's shout, the brothers followed after, and were soon close upon the skirts of the herd. There was no giving the herd time to recover from its sudden panic. That would be but to do the work all over again. They were headed in the right direction, and must be held to it.

With four men in the rear, the other five scattered along the flanks to guard against a change of course, on swept the long-legged mass at a rate that opened the eyes of Arthur and Ross. It seemed more like chasing a herd of elks, than driving cattle. If they could run so fast in a crowded mass, what could one do with a clear field? A Texan long-horn is to one of our cattle, what the prong-horn is to a tame goat.

Not for long did the brothers remember the repeated warnings of the young ranchero, and carried away by the wild excitement of the hour, they pressed closer upon the heels of the flying herd, plying their whips with more energy than skill. Arthur managed to get in several good strokes upon a gaunt, blue steer, and the animal, stung to madness, slackened its pace enough to get its head clear of the rear rank, then turned sharply, with a furious bellow, charging upon its tormentor.

If left alone, the mustang would easily have avoided the headlong rush, but Arthur instinctively bore hard upon the reins, and with a scream of pain the horse reared and fell backward. More by good luck than management, the lad fell clear of the animal, and though bruised, sprung to his feet almost instantly, only to face the threatening horns of the beast he had thoughtlessly goaded into madness.

Fortunately for him, Walt had kept an eye upon the brothers and seeing that his warning

shout was either unheard or unheeded, at once sped to the rescue. He saw that Arthur was too bewildered or else too much hurt to dodge the charge, and so took the one risky chance of saving him from the threatening horns.

Riding straight at the steer, he lifted his horse and hurled it bodily against the side of the brute. The shock was terrible. Horse and rider and steer all went down in one confused heap, but like a cat, the young ranchero sprang to his feet, whip in hand, as the steer arose.

Walt sprang back to a distance more effective for his weapon, and throwing the whole of his strength and skill into the effort, rained a storm of blows upon the furious animal's front so rapid and stinging that the creature was blinded and perfectly helpless, roaring under the lash that drew blood at every stroke. Then, unable to withstand that terrible weapon it wheeled and sped after its companions.

Beyond the scare, no serious harm was done, and a minute later the cousins were mounted and galloping along after the retreating herd.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SENAL.

"WHAT do you think of our long-horns, now?" and the young ranchero grinned broadly as he turned to Arthur Duncan.

"I've known just such horns put to worse use, and I'd rather face the point, than the butt with you at the other end of it."

With a laugh Walt raised the long, silver-mounted horn to his lips and sounded a prolonged, musical blast.

"There's music in it, if one only knows how to blow it out. When you hear a dozen of them coming from as many different directions, out of the early morn, and mingling with the bell-notes of the bounds, then you will understand what I mean."

"It must be delicious," grunted Ross, as his mustang stumbled. "We heard the sound of your mellow horn in the early morn for the past two days, and, if you have no objections, for the future please send an old he donkey to bray our slumber away, for, sure's your born, your breath sounds mighty bad in a horn."

The young ranchero made no reply, for he saw that mischief was brewing. That others were equally upon the alert, a sharp, warning *not* from the horns of the herd-men upon either side of the drove, plainly proved.

"You two slack up!" cried Walt, sharply, to the brothers. "Hold your horses well in hand, ready to dodge—if they crowd you close, use your revolvers—and shoot to kill!"

Arthur and Ross stared at each other in amazement. What could he mean? Was there danger of Indians—of cattle-thieves? As far as the eye could reach there was no living object in view save the herd of cattle, the

horses and their riders. In their ignorance, the brothers never suspected that the danger was in that fleeing herd, yet the signs were easy to be read by an experienced eye.

Their speed was decreasing. Those upon the outside were crowding upon the compact center, but their long-horned fronts were turned outward and shaken with short, explosive bellows. And scarcely had Walt finished his word of warning than, as by one accord, the cattle broke ranks and scattered in every direction, despite the stinging lashes and furious yelling of the herders.

Then the brothers realized their danger, but it was too late to wholly avoid it. Ere they could turn their horses to flee, the hairy monsters were upon them.

Arthur, taking counsel of dear experience, left his horse to itself, and as a consequence the nimble, knowing creature bore him unscathed through that headlong, unreasoning charge. Not so Ross. A long-legged steer with lowered head seemed bent on fairly running him down. If left to itself, the mustang, which was boldly facing the animal, would have dodged the shock, but Ross pulled hard upon the left rein, and, unable to resist the jaw-breaking bit, the horse wheeled, just in time to receive the full force of the shock upon its right side.

Horse, steer and rider went down together, just as with a shrill yell, the young ranchero rushed up. He bent low in the saddle, making a sure grasp at the lad's belt, and then, with a superhuman effort, rose erect in the saddle, bearing with him his cousin, thus dextrously snatched from almost certain death.

A dozen leaps and they were clear of the ruck. Ross was dropped gently to the ground and the next moment Walt almost fell from the saddle, white and wan as a ghost, entirely overcome by the danger his cousin had run and the terrible strain upon his powers of mind and body.

There were few words spoken. The danger had been too great and was still too recent. A long, warm clasp of the hand, an interchange of deep, earnest glances; no more.

The black mustang was lying motionless in a pool of its own blood. The long, slender horn of the steer had entered just behind its foreleg, passing through and emerging at the left breast. Death had been almost instantaneous.

There was no time for conversation. Pedrillo and the others had succeeded in turning the leaders of the herd, and the rest were flocking around them. Ross clambered up behind Walt, and as they swept around to the rear of the cattle, the young ranchero summoned the cook and bade him give his mount to Ross and follow on foot with the furniture of the dead mustang.

Ross would have protested, but Walt would not hear him. They were only three miles

from the big corral, and the man would be only too glad to escape his share of the work at the expense of so short a walk.

A few minutes later they came in sight of the huge corral, or rather cluster of corrals, and at the clear blast of Walt's horn, near a hundred horsemen were seen forming in two long lines through which the cattle were to be forced into the corral.

Now came the tug of war. The cattle apparently remembered their past experience upon similar occasions, and fought fiercely for liberty, but in vain. Wherever they turned there was a horseman with his terrible whip. Blood followed every blow, and the pistol-like cracks were unceasing.

Slowly the cattle were forced down the lines, and each moment set more men at liberty to force them on, until, with a headlong rush, the foremost of the herd plunged through the opening into the corral. The others followed in hot haste, the bars were replaced, and the first act was done.

Uncle Frank came up and cordially greeted his nephews, for he had not been at home since their arrival. He led them to where they could overlook the proceedings, and explained all that occurred.

As for Walt, he was in the midst of the wild scene, glorying in the mad, dangerous turmoil.

As previously stated, the main object of the autumn *rodeo*, is to collect all the cows that have young calves in order to mark the cattle so that there may be no doubts as to the ownership of each, when the spring *rodeo* takes place, which is for the purpose of branding the yearlings.

At the fall gathering the calves are still unweaned, and, of course, stick closely to their mothers. The *senal*, or mark upon her ears, shows to whom each cow belongs, and the calves are given the same mark. Every stock-raiser has his peculiar *senal*, together with his brand, duly recorded. A case of counterfeiting seldom occurs.

The first move was to separate the cows and calves from the male cattle. Besides the bars through which the herd had entered the corral there were three others, one upon each side and end, each opening into another corral.

Before each of these three openings stood two men, armed with whips. A score of others were in the corral, similarly armed, whose duty it was to separate the bulls, steers and yearlings from the cows and calves, one or two at a time, and force toward one of the openings, when the guards would step aside, and the cattle, seeing liberty apparently before them, would dash through the bars, only to find that they had exchanged one prison for another.

The scene was as exciting as it was dangerous. Few animals have more of the devil in

their composition than these same long-horns. They are treacherous in the extreme. An old and apparently broken-down ox will suddenly and without visible cause, cast off the shackles of age and infirmity, and "run a muck" with all the deadly fury of an insane Malay. How much worse, then, are a hundred of them, in the prime of age and condition, goaded to fury by the yells and the cracks of the cruel whips!

It calls for cool courage and thorough self-reliance in the man who would face them, upon foot and armed only with a whip, especially when surrounded by trampling hoofs and clattering horns—horns that would slip through one's body as easily as a spear or saber.

Arthur and Ross Duncan watched the exciting scene with glowing eyes and thrilling nerves. Each moment they expected to witness some bloody tragedy, but as often were they agreeably disappointed.

By twos and threes the male cattle were driven into the other corrals, until only the cows and calves were left. Then all save the outer set of bars were securely fastened, and the work of applying the senal was commenced.

Several of the cows were separated from the rest, and almost as quickly their calves were beside them, panting and quivering with fear and fatigue. The guards stepped aside, the animals rushed forth, bellowing with joy. As many horsemen were in waiting, and riding alongside, saw how the cows were marked. Then a cast of the lasso secured the calf. The marker ran forward, and kneeling upon its neck, quickly cut the senal upon one or both ears, as the case demanded, then removed the noose, leaving cow and calf to flee until fatigue or a sense of safety induced it to stop.

Before the hour of noon, all the calves were marked, and the men, after a wash from the barrels of water hauled to the spot for that purpose, gathered beneath the shade of the corral-fence to eat a cold dinner.

The peculiar care which both Arthur and Ross betrayed in seating themselves, called forth many good-humored jokes, but these were changed to expressions of sympathy, when Walt narrated the accident which had occurred to each of them.

Uncle Frank looked grave, but the cousins came to the rescue and absolved Walt from even the shadow of carelessness. They had forgotten his repeated advice, and suffered the consequence.

"Now then," said the young ranchero, when an hour had been passed in rest, "you'll see the choicest part of the whole business. Of course, since you don't know how to manage the lariat, you can't take a very active part in the sport, but you must mount, and I warrant you'll enjoy it as much as anybody. Come on!"

CHAPTER V.

THE HIERRO.

"WHAT'S in the wind, now?" was the natural inquiry put to the young ranchero by Arthur and Ross, when they noticed his growing excitement.

There's fun ahead, and plenty of it! Come on. I'll explain it all while we are rigging out our horses."

Now, neither Arthur nor Ross felt very keen for the saddle, for sundry reasons, but they had left their home to learn what everyday-life was upon a stock-farm, and a few inches of tender skin should not cow them thus early. With this secret resolve, they followed their cousin's example and prepared their mustangs for work. While thus occupied, Walt gave them an idea of what was coming.

Where one's cattle are numbered by thousands, and the grazing grounds measured by the league, it is not so strange that a goodly number of calves should escape the fall marking and the spring branding both, though, sooner or later, they must bear the badge of servitude.

At this *rodeo* the number of "volunteers" was unusually large, and nearly two hundred unmarked, unbranded yearlings had been separated from the rest and penned in a side corral, being reserved as a fitting conclusion of their three days' labors. These were to be marked and branded.

"But how can you tell which is which?" asked Arthur, as he rather gingerly settled himself in the saddle.

"We can't; so we each take one third of the lot, and call it square. Come—there's father beckoning to us. Let's see what he wants."

Uncle Frank led the way to the fence of the corral which contained the unmarked cattle, and appeared to be pointing out certain peculiarities among them to his nephews. Instead, he was speaking to his son.

"Make a run or two, if you like, Walt, but don't overwork your horse. There's another job on hand, that will need a fresh horse and man."

"Better speak to Pedrillo, then—"

"There it is!" and Uncle Frank's brows contracted. "Warren has made sure of him, already. You see, this is the way of it. We found among the cattle an unusually fine six-year-old bull, without mark or brand, and of course saved him to be marked with the rest. Just before dinner, Warren bantered Jones and I to choose a man each, and ride for the bull and a hundred dollars cash. We couldn't well refuse, and so the match was made. Now here comes Pedrillo, and tells me that Warren had secured him to ride, before he proposed the match."

"Rather sharp practice, seeing the *duckaro* is in your employ," laughed the young ran-

chero. "I'll do the best I know, and if you lose, 'twill not be my fault."

The boys were eager to see everything, and Walt led them over to where his father's men were gathered. One man, with bare arms and in a blacksmith's apron, was bending over a brazier filled with glowing charcoal, in which were several long-handled irons. At a word from Walt, he pulled one out and held it up before the brothers. The branding-iron attached was pretty fairly described by Ross, when he declared that it looked more like a huge spider that an elephant had trod on than aught else he could think of.

A loud blast from an ox-horn gave notice that the work was about to begin, and hurriedly placing his cousins where they could see all without being in the way, Walt took up his position a few yards from the bars of the corral, lasso ready curled in his hand. Two men kept close in his rear, the duties of which were soon made clear.

The guardians of the opening sprung aside, and three fine yearlings charged through and made a desperate dash for liberty.

According to the arrangements made beforehand, he who rode for Frank Harvey was entitled to the choice of the first lot; second choice of the next trio; the last of the third; first of the fourth lot set free; thus alternating to the end, by which means each owner was favored alike.

Walt quickly made his choice, and dashing forward, sent his lasso curling through the air. The instant the cast was made, his horse wheeled half-around, planting its feet firmly and bracing itself against the coming shock. With a sharp twang the lariat straightened out, the young heifer was flung upon its haunches, then pulled over upon its side. The two assistants rode forward, displaying no less skill with the lasso than their young master. One noose secured both hind legs, the other caught the right fore-foot, and a moment later the heifer was lying perfectly helpless, the three lassoes pulling strongly in as many different directions.

A man, armed with a keen knife, ran forward and kneeling upon the animal's neck, quickly put the *senal*, or mark of his master, upon both ears.

Close upon his heels came the blacksmith, bearing the dull red branding iron. Touching this to the damp sand, tempering the heat with the judgment of one well skilled in his art, he pressed the *hierro* upon the heifer's hip, holding it there until the blue smoke and the sickening smell of burning hair and hide scented the air. With a shout that signified his work was performed, he removed the iron and hurried to place it in the brazier. The marker who through this had knelt upon the heifer's neck, now flung off the ropes, and retreated.

The animal staggered to his feet, gave one mighty shake, and with tail on end and a hollow bellow, plunged away at breakneck speed.

This description will suffice for all the repetitions of the capture, marking and branding. In a few cases there were temporary failures, some amusing incidents, but through all there was a similarity to the above that would render a detailed description tedious. Enough that Walt retired to the side of his cousins after his second cast, and with them enjoyed the exciting scene. Two hours later the last animal was marked, branded and turned loose to run at will.

Upon ordinary occasions this would be the signal for breaking up and starting for home, but there was still the "Maverick" to be disposed of. Warren was in high feather, and, feeling assured of success, thanks to his foresight in securing Pedrillo as his champion, kept pressing bets upon everybody alike. Jones, the other of the three rancheros, fought shy of his offers. But not so Uncle Frank. At a nod from Walt, he accepted the wagers whenever offered, until, rendered uneasy by such cool confidence, Warren ceased his offers and insisted upon the match taking place at once.

Meanwhile Walt and his cousins had taken a good look at the bull. It was shut up in a corral by itself, and was the picture of sullen ferocity, slowly pacing around the inclosure, occasionally giving the stout fence a vicious dig with its horns. A huge, deep-red animal, all bone and muscle, with a stiff, wiry mane. Its back and shoulders bore the scars of many a desperate fight, and one horn had been splintered half-way to its base.

"Do your best, Walt," muttered his father, "I've got over five hundred dollars on the result."

"You will be that much the richer in an hour. Pedrillo is going to ride his black. I found that out before I gave you the signal. It is faster than my horse, but I'll win sure!"

The terms of the match were announced. The bull was to be turned loose, and given five minutes' law. Then, at the word, the three champions were to follow. The one whose lasso first closed upon the animal was to be the victor.

As the bars were lowered the bull dashed out and away, but as he cleared the crowd, his speed slackened; he stopped, and for a minute seemed to deliberate whether or no he should not avenge the insults he had received upon the gathering. Prudence prevailed, however, and with a sullen bellow he trotted leisurely away after the distant cattle.

Walt took occasion of the wait to say to his cousins:

"Follow after us as close as you can, and you'll see some fun."

There was no time for any answer. The moment for starting was close at hand, and the three champions drew abreast, ready for the word.

It came—and as by one impulse, the trio plunged forward, the crowd following hard behind. For a hundred yards the champions rode even, then, inch by inch, Jones's champion began to drop behind, and, ere half a mile was covered, it was evident that he was out of the race. Not so the others. Neck and neck they raced, and there was no visible change in their positions, until they were within three hundred yards of the fleeing bull. Then, with a low laugh, Pedrillo touched his black with the spur, and it shot ahead, one, two—half a dozen lengths. But Walt only smiled. He felt that his turn was near at hand.

Less than a hundred yards ahead of Pedrillo was the bull. The *buckaro* was gathering up his lasso in readiness for the winning cast. He glanced over his shoulder at the young ranchero; but he exulted too soon.

Walt uttered a sharp, peculiar whistle. As though by magic, the black mustang dropped to the ground, and, taken utterly by surprise, Pedrillo was flung over its head, and as Walt dashed past him, a mocking laugh filled his ear. Quick as a cat, he leaped to his feet and sprung into the saddle, as his mustang arose, but it was only to see the lasso of his young rival settle over the bull's head.

Ere the animal could arise, two more lassoes were fast, and then wound around its legs in such a manner as to hold it helpless until the knife and branding-iron had done their work.

"Turn about is fair play!" muttered Walt, in the *buckaro's* ear. "You gave me a tumble from that same horse, and tried to make me believe it stumbled accidentally. But I caught your signal, and vowed I'd get square."

"I'll pay the debt, senior—and with interest!" muttered the horse-breaker, his black eyes glittering.

Walt laughed, carelessly, but he was fated to remember these words, at no distant day.

CHAPTER VI.

CHASING THE PRONG-HORNS.

A WEEK or two passed quietly away after the rodeo was brought to a successful conclusion, during which Arthur and Ross Duncan faithfully carried out their resolve of learning the everyday routine of life upon a stock-farm. These little details were interesting enough to live through, possessing as they did all the charms of novelty, but the reader would find a literal record rather dull reading.

Enough that the brothers familiarized themselves with the Mexican saddle and bridle, and, through persistence, gained their "riding breeches." That is, they could ride from morn

till dawn without especial fatigue, or flinching whenever they sat upon the hard benches around the supper table.

Cousin Walt was an oracle to them, save on one point. When he spoke of catching the swift-footed antelopes, or prong-horns, by means of horses and hounds, they scouted at the idea. They had read too much to swallow such a marvel. The wind itself could not keep pace with the "goats."

"You will learn your mistake, some day," was the quiet reply. "You will see dogs pull down a prong-horn, and, if you like, I will take one alive with the lariat."

As a natural consequence, this wordy but amicable dispute resulted in an expedition, the main object of which was to forever settle the contested question.

The day had not yet dawned when the little cavalcade of five persons rode away from the ranch. Pedrillo, the *buckaro*, and a lithe, wiry half-breed bore the cousins company.

Hard at their heels followed half a dozen dogs, four of them being pure-blooded grayhounds, the others being Irish stag-hounds, of fair blood and appearance, though the critical eye might detect a far-away cross of the foxhound, especially about the head.

They were well trained and under thorough command. At frequent intervals a jack-rabbit would be kicked out of its form by some one of the dancing, prancing horses, and dart away after its own peculiar fashion, making huge leaps, its legs as straight and unbending as though jointless, its nose thrust out and long ears lying flat along its shoulders. Then it would come to an abrupt halt, several hundred yards away, and its huge, black-tipped ears would pop up above the grass in a listening attitude. The dogs would whine appealingly and look up into the face of their young master, but the asked-for word did not come, and their heads would droop as they trotted silently along.

The fates seemed adverse to the hopes of the hunters during the first part of the day, for not a prong-horn was sighted, though usually so plenty. To and fro, quartering the prairie, paying a visit to every hollow and "draw," the young ranchero led the way, resolved to "find," though he searched till dark.

Reaching a depression in the soil, around which upon every hand rose the prairie swells, the party divided and each one rode toward a chosen point, to view the land beyond. Pedrillo was the successful one, and the boys saw him bend low in the saddle and hastily retreat down the hillside. That was enough. They knew that the long-sought-for game was found, and eagerly flocked together.

"A dozen goats, senior," said the *buckaro*, his dark eyes glowing. "You can send the dogs

over, and we can see the chase without any trouble.

Walt sprang from his saddle and directed the half-breed to put the stag-hounds in leash. When this was done he motioned the grayhounds to follow, and with them at his heels he glided up the slope, sinking low as he approached the summit, until he was completely hidden in the tall grass.

Presently his hand was visible, motioning the others to advance, but ere they reached his position, he arose to his feet with a clear ringing yell.

A moment later the party were brought together upon the ridge, gazing eagerly at the chase, which swept along the side of the slope.

"I wanted you to see the start," said Walt, "but the goats took the alarm, and so I had to send the dogs in."

"They're gone—out of sight!" cried Arthur, greatly excited by the momentary glimpse of the chase, so swift, yet so smooth and graceful. "Come on—"

"Cool and easy, boy," laughed Walt, though he mounted as he spoke. "You'll see all you want, right from here. Didn't I tell you so?"

Even as he spoke the antelopes appeared in view, over half a mile away, upon the ridge, and sped on, the grayhounds barely fifty yards behind them, keeping upon the highest ground, as though bent on regaining the spot from whence they started.

The antelope is a slave to one habit that is frequently taken advantage of, to its sorrow. That is, like the hare and jack-rabbit, it will frequently double upon itself whenever it is chased. It will do this when upon a perfectly level plain with a clean course before it. A hound that is well broken to the chase will take advantage of this, by taking a "short cut," and antelopes are not unfrequently killed by dogs far their inferior both in speed and bottom.

Another habit is no less dangerous, where the ground is not a dead-level. The prong-horn will invariably keep to the highest ground, as though they wished to guard against running into a trap. Nor was this case an exception to the general rule. Straight around the edge of the vast basin sped the graceful creatures, but swift though they were, they barely held their vantage-ground against the long gaunt grayhounds.

"Down the hill!" cried Walt, setting the example. "If we head them off here, they'll cut across to the next ridge."

The antelopes paid no attention to the horse-men, but flashed past the spot so recently occupied and began their second circuit of the basin. The entire chase was viewed by the brothers with thrilling enthusiasm. Never before had they seen a sight like this.

But Walt was determined to bring the affair to an end before the grayhounds were quite

knocked up, and taking his lasso, he bade the half-breed follow him with the stag-hounds still in leash. Keeping well covered by the rank grass, he crept up to the ridge, and there lay in wait for the oncoming chase.

That was not long, though the prong-horns ran slower and with less elasticity than at first. Unsuspecting the ambush, they drew within range of the lasso. With a shout as warning to the half-breed to let slip his hounds, the young ranchero sprang up and made his cast.

His aim was true, and he jerked the leader to the ground. The others crowded together in bewildered surprise. The next instant they were assailed from front and rear, and each hound claimed its victim, dragging it to the ground with as much apparent ease as a cat masters a mouse.

The four survivors, losing all instinct in that terrible moment, darted down the slope almost directly for the little party of horsemen, whose rifles and pistols rung out sharply and added to the slaughter. But one of that fated herd escaped with life, three failing to lead, one to the lasso, and six beneath the jaws of the hounds.

"Will you believe my story now?" laughed Walt, when the party once more came together. "I admit that such a wholesale haul is a rare occurrence, but with good dogs you can take an antelope or two any day, by putting in fresh hounds when the first are tired out."

"We'll admit anything and believe everything. But how are we going to get all these home?"

"We could carry them, but as we're a dozen miles from the ranch, I move we send back for a wagon, while we go into camp over on the creek. There's plenty of fish, and I've got hooks."

"But Mr. Jones spoke for the dogs for tomorrow."

"They can go, too. We'll not need them. How is it?"

"Just as you say; I'd like to camp out, for one."

"And I," promptly put in Ross.

"That settles it, then. The creek is less than two miles from here. We'll clean the goats, and carry them over there. Pedrillo and Marco can take the dogs home, and fetch out a team early in the morning."

So it was settled. Walter, Pedrillo and the half-breed quickly disemboweled the antelopes, and stuffed the hollows full of green grass. Then, tied two and two, by the legs, the carcasses were hung upon the horses and the party struck over the ridge for the creek; the winding course of which was clearly indicated by the dark fringe of timber and undergrowth along its banks.

This reached, and a neat little glade selected as the camping ground, the antelopes were hung upon low branches out of the way. Then

the buckaro and Marco, with the hounds, took their departure, the former calling out, significantly:

"Remember, senor, what we heard about the horse-thieves. Those three horses would be worth running some risk for."

"They will get more lead than horseflesh, if the dogs pay us a visit," laughed the young ranchero. "Come, boys, let's rig up a shanty. The nights are too cold now to sleep without some cover."

CHAPTER VII.

NOCTURNAL DISTURBANCES.

BOTH Arthur and Ross Duncan sprung willingly to work when the young ranchero called upon them, and under his guidance the shelter for their night's encampment quickly arose. Though rude, it served the purpose admirably.

Two low-branched trees, a dozen feet apart, were used to support the ridge-pole—a dead sapling. Poles and decaying limbs were placed with one end resting upon this, the other reaching the ground at an angle of thirty degrees. Over this were placed leafy twigs and armfuls of dried grass until the roof was impervious to dew, if not to rain itself.

Satisfied with this, more grass and dry leaves were collected to form material for a bed, then:

"Now cut you a light pole apiece, and tie on these lines, while I look up some bait," said Walt.

He was promptly obeyed, though the boys had a quiet laugh over the rude tackle, and, like all youthful fishermen who have been trained to the reel and fly, felt that the catch would be but light indeed with such weapons.

Walt soon found what he was in search of: an old rotten stump, fairly honeycombed by borers. A sturdy kick shattered the thin shell, and from the crumbling mass out rolled dozens of red-headed grub-worms, "crawly" to handle, but the most killing bait known to rural fishermen.

Filing a large leaf with the grubs, Walt returned to his comrades. Together they reached the creek, a small, quiet stream, but little more than a succession of holes or pools, connected by miniature rapids, where the water bubbled and murmured over the clear, pebbly sand.

"You needn't be so careful," and the young ranchero laughed softly at the caution with which his cousins approached the water. "There are no trout here to be frightened by a shadow. Make as much noise and show yourselves as much as you please; our country fish are rather sociable than exclusive. What is lacking in delicacy is more than made up in variety. You may catch half a dozen varieties out of this little hole, and each one of them has a different way of taking the bait. At the

first nibble I'll tell you what kind of fish is at the bait. Now watch," and as he spoke Walt dropped his baited hook near the middle of the pool. "That's sun-fish," he cried, as the painted float disappeared ere the weighted hook had time to sink a foot, and he pulled out a small fish weighing only several ounces. "Good eating, but small and full of bones. This kind only takes the bait while it is sinking. There's another—the maw-mouth perch, as we call it, of the same family, though—that waits until the bait is still, then quietly gorges it, and in nine cases out of ten you never know the difference until you get tired of waiting for a bite, and go to change the position of your line. There's the chub—long, white, as round as your finger—that bites freely, but skims your cork along the surface, instead of pulling it under. The red-horse, built like the chub, but bright pink and vermilion around the throat and upper belly, gives two or three short bobs, then darts away like an arrow. The pull-out—or bull-head, as we call them—takes its time, gives a gentle dab or two at the float, then waits a bit. A stranger would believe it had gone away, but not so. When a big-headed cat smells at the bait, he is yours, if you only know how to wait. Perhaps a minute later comes another bob; he is taking the bait in his teeth, but does not attempt to swallow it until he is swimming away. If you pull up now you will lose your fish. He draws the float slowly along the top of the water, so gently that not a ripple is made, then the float sinks under at a sharp angle. The bait is swallowed, and all you have to do is to pull in your fish."

Thus the young ranchero discoursed, and his hands were quite as busy as his tongue. The fish bit eagerly, and the bank behind was quickly alive with the flapping victims. One thing puzzled Arthur and Ross. So long as their cousin's hook was in the water, not a fish would touch their bait, though their tackle was the same sort and they used the same kind of bait. Walt could not explain why this was so, nor have I ever found one who could: nevertheless, it is a well-known fact.

Half an hour sufficed to catch all the fish they could eat for supper and breakfast, and Walt set about cleaning them, while the brothers collected wood for the fire, which they intended to keep burning through the night. This was necessary for comfort. Though it was then the lovely Indian summer, and the days were sometimes uncomfortably warm, the nights were keen and cold, with sharp frosts, ice forming to the thickness of window glass.

With fish and antelope-steaks roasted before the glowing fire, the boys ate heartily with an appetite such as the prairie air alone can give. This over, and the horses brought nearer to the camp, they stretched out under the lean-to, and

chatting merrily. Walt was enjoying his pipe; the brothers did not use the weed.

Arthur and Ross eagerly drank in the words of their cousin, as he told them about the many interesting incidents of his prairie life. In the days gone by, stock-growing was far less pleasant than now. Cunning Indians and no less to be feared white thieves gave the rancheros ample work, and, young as he was, Walt had taken more than one long and hard ride after the bold robbers, when the trail was almost certain to end in a hard fight, bloodshed and even death.

He was in the midst of one of these adventures, when the night air was rent by a wild, weird sound—a short, snapping yelp, dying away in a long-drawn, lugubrious wail, that caused the brothers to involuntarily draw nearer together, a cold chill playing along their spinal column.

The young ranchero laughed as he kicked the glowing butt of a limb further into the fire.

"You'll get used to that kind of music before long. When the snow comes, it will drive them in to the settlements, where food is more plenty."

"It was a wolf, then?"

"Yes—an excuse for one. A coyote; about as dangerous as so many rats. If they were timber-wolves, now, we would need to look after the horses. But even with them, unless in the middle of an unusually severe winter, a man is safe enough, notwithstanding all that the sensational writers tell you."

Walt resumed his narrative where he had broken off when the coyote began its serenade, but it no longer held the attention of the brothers. They were listening to the doleful sound of the coyote—no longer alone. Like echoes came the sounds of other yelping wails, growing nearer and more numerous with each passing moment, until it seemed as though both prairie and timber were alive with the creatures. Despite the assurance given by Walt, the brothers were far from being at ease. Their excited brains would recall all the horrible stories they had read of the ravenous creatures, until each fluttering leaf was a wolf stealing up within leaping distance to bury its thirsty fangs in their throats.

The young ranchero saw this, and said all he could to banish their unfounded fears, but only with partial success.

"They smell the blood of the goats," he said, carelessly. "They'll hang around until we leave in the morning, and then fight for the scraps we leave. There! look at the foot of the cottonwood, yonder. You see those bright spots? They are the eyes of the brute that started this sweet chorus. Just watch me spoil his fun."

Without raising his body, Walt rested his revolver upon his hip and with rapid aim,

fired. As by magic the unearthly concert was stilled. Only the faint moaning of the wind among the treetops, the soft trampling of the feeding horses, with an occasional half sneeze. All other sounds were stilled.

Walt arose and walked over to the tree, then returned bearing a small, dirty yellow creature with a bullet-hole between his eyes. The brothers examined it curiously, as the first of its kind they had ever seen. As a natural result, they were ashamed at having allowed their fears to get the better of them on account of such insignificant-looking creatures, and casting the carcass into the brush, they lay down to sleep.

Just as they were dropping off into a doze, the diabolical chorus again burst forth, and sleep fled disgusted from their eyelids. Not so with Walt. He was snoring away in placid slumber as though the hideous concert was but the soft lullaby of his dead mother.

Uneasily the brothers rolled and tossed. They could not sleep, and felt angry as they listened to their cousin's nasal accompaniment to the lupine serenade.

Then a quavering, indescribable wail rose upon the night air. The brothers started up, and so did the young ranchero, as wide awake as though he had never closed his eyes in slumber. He slowly shook his head in answer to the inquiring looks of the brothers.

"I don't know what it was," he said, softly. "I was dreaming when it awoke me. But whatever it was, it has shut up the wolves."

"It sounded like an Indian's yell, to me," ventured Ross.

"They don't give notice, like that," laughed Walt. "It may have been a timber-wolf. If I had only been awake, I could have told—hark!"

One of the tethered horses snorted loudly and pawed the ground, as though in angry alarm.

"There's something wrong going on," muttered Walt, as he picked up his rifle. "Look to your guns, but don't stir from here until you hear from me."

Without another word he left the lean-to and passing around the fire, vanished amidst the weird shadows cast by the flickering flames.

Then, from so close that the brothers shrunk back, arose that strange, unearthly sound.

What could it be?

CHAPTER VIII.

UNWELCOME VISITORS.

THE wild, wailing sound arose from apparently within arm's length, yet nothing could be seen save the shifting shadows as the night wind caused the flames of the camp-fire to dance and flicker, no sound save that weird, unearthly cry, the moaning among the tree-

tops, the suspicious snorting and angry pawing of the startled horses.

Then it was that Arthur and Ross Duncan showed the good blood that filled their veins. Back to back they stood before the lean-to, with ready pistols and knives, awaiting the attack of the unknown foe. If their faces were paler, if their hearts beat faster than usual, it was through excitement, not fear.

A dark shape came toward them, and at a warning word from Arthur, two revolvers covered it, but ere the triggers could be pulled, the shadowy figure vanished, and the low voice of their cousin was heard:

"Don't waste your powder and lead on a friend, boys. I'll show you something a heap better'n that to shoot at, if you'll let me off this time."

"You ought to be more careful, Walt," and Arthur's voice was far from steady as he spoke. "I had you covered, and in another moment—"

"That's all right. Give you my word, I expected to find you hid under the blankets, bewailing the unlucky stars that led you out here to fall untimely victims to this Horrible Howler of the Pathless Plains. I'm glad to see you're better grit—"

"Oh, drop that nonsense—what in thunder is all about, anyway?" impatiently cried Ross.

"I was just thinking—I don't know what I said," and the young ranchero laughed shortly. "It's all right, though, now I know you are to be depended upon. Take your rifles and do just as I do."

Ross gave an impatient snort, but the brothers did as bidden.

"I'm going first," added Walt. "I'll make for that tree, where I shot the wolf, and you must follow when I whistle. If the critter jumps me, don't risk a shot unless you're sure, but wade in with your knives. Understand?"

"What critter? Can't you speak out? You say shoot and stab, and all that, while we don't know whether it is a grasshopper or a buck Injun we've got to look out for."

"I don't know much more. It is some sort of an animal, but whether timber wolf or something worse, I can't say. I caught just a glimpse of it sneaking around, after the fresh meat, I reckon."

Walt waited for no more, but glided swiftly toward the tree indicated, his weapons ready for use. They were not needed, just then. If seen by the prowling animal at all, he was unmolested, and uttering the agreed upon signal, he was soon rejoiced by the brothers.

"All we can do is to wait here and watch," he muttered, with a slow, searching glance around. "We might find too much if we went skirmishing around in the dark—"

The sentence was never finished. From close

behind them came that wailing cry, followed by a faint rustling among the bushes, then all was still.

"That's interesting," muttered Walt, with a forced laugh. "Ten feet further and we would have been close enough to have shaken paws with his bashful majesty! Well, it settles one question; he is not overly anxious to come to close quarters with us, anyway."

Neither Arthur nor Ross spoke. They were new to such experience, and though their feelings were not those of fear, they could not trust their tongues to utter commonplace words.

"I see him!" softly muttered the young ranchero, after a few minutes of silent waiting and watching. "Just to the right of that stunted elm—ha!"

Even as he spoke, a long, gaunt body shot through the air, over the glowing camp fire, and struck with a heavy shock against the hanging carcasses of the prong-horns. A momentary swaying to and fro, then the fastenings gave way, and both fell heavily to the ground.

"Now!" grated Walt. "Take him behind the fore-leg, but wait until I give the word. Ready? fire!"

As one explosion the triple report rung out, and the cousins sprang to one side, clear of the smoke, revolvers in hand; but there was no need of a second volley.

At the report the wild beast reared upon its hind feet with an ear-splitting screech, pawing the air furiously for a moment, then leaped high up, turning a half summerset and falling head-first into the fire. A spasmodic kick that scattered the blazing brands in every direction rolled the creature out of the fire, where it lay quivering in death.

The boys advanced slowly, but their caution was needless. The formidable creature was dead; two bullets entered behind its right shoulder, emerging upon the left side of its neck, while Walt had planted his lead back of the ear, into the beast's brain.

"It is a panther, I reckon," and the young ranchero laughed a little proudly as he arose from the examination. "I did not believe there were any in these parts. There hasn't been one killed near here since I can remember. We'd better skin it now; it'll be easier work than in the morning, even if the wolves were to let it alone. We'll need the skin to show when we tell the story, too."

The brothers were willing enough, but Walt soon begged them to leave the work to him, lest the hide should be ruined.

"You don't reckon there's many more of them around, do you?" suddenly asked Ross, as a low, mournful howl came to their ears.

"There's your answer," laughed the young ranchero. "When the coyotes give voice, you can swear that there is nothing more dangerous

around. You might range these diggings until you were gray-headed, and never meet another of these gentlemen. He strayed down from the mountains, I suppose; but he woke up the wrong family when he tackled us."

Boys will be boys, and, under the circumstances, we can't blame the young fellows if they indulged in not a little boasting and self-glorification.

The panther was skinned and stretched temporarily between two saplings. Then, changing the horses' position once more, and renewing the fire, the cousins returned to their blankets and bed of leaves.

But not to sleep. Possibly their recent adventure had something to do with it, but the constant yelping, barking and howling of the prairie wolves was doubly irritating now. The pestiferous brutes seemed bent on making ample amends for their brief silence when the lordly panther was prowling around. Each wolf seemed possessed of a dozen throats, each throat emitting a never-ending sound more diabolical than all the rest combined. Even Walt, accustomed as he was to these prairie concerts, could not sleep, but turned uneasily from side to side, finally sitting up with an explosive sentence far more forcible than pious.

"Worse than the panther, a blamed sight!" muttered Ross, disgustfully. "I'm going to spoil a thousand or two of them screaming whelps, if my powder only holds out!"

"Don't you do it," interrupted Walt. "It'll only be time and ammunition wasted. I'll show you a little trick worth a dozen o' that. Strange I didn't think of trying it before. Better late than never, though. Take your knife and cut off a chunk of goat meat."

Wondering what new kink the young ranchero had got hold of now, Ross obeyed.

"Now cut it up into chunks about the size of a hen's egg," continued Walt, turning out the contents of his pockets upon the blanket. "Look out for eyes, and whenever you see a pair, throw a piece of meat at it."

"You don't mean to quiet them by feeding?" and Arthur opened his big eyes in astonishment.

"I mean to stuff one of them so full he won't want anything more to eat in a hurry," laughed Walt.

"What's one, where there's seventeen hundred million of the pesky brutes?" sniffed Ross viciously hurling a piece of meat at a pair of glowing eyes.

"Just give me a chance, and I'll prove that I'm not quite the fool you seem to think. 'There's more ways than one to kill a cat.'"

While speaking the young ranchero was not idle. From an old cap-box he extracted half a dozen fish-hooks, and bound the shanks firmly together in two bunches, so that they formed a miniature grapnel. He thrust the barb of one

hook firmly into a piece of meat, then with a bit of string bound the shanks in place. The other grapnel was secured in a like manner to the opposite side, but so that the two uncovered barbs turned in the contrary direction to the hooks first secured.

"Now then, my infernal machine is all ready," and Walt laughed aloud at the puzzled expression with which the brothers regarded his contrivance. "Give the four-legged nightingales a fresh bait, now."

Three bits of meat, among which was the infernal machine, went flying out among the howling wolves. There was a scuffle, a snapping snarl or two, then the hungry beasts squatted upon their haunches just upon the edge of the circle of light.

"Well, I don't see anything—" began Ross, but then he *did* see!

One of the coyotes started forward with a most unearthly howl, clawing at its open mouth with frantic energy. As this did not relieve it, it darted away as though striving to run from the biting devil in its throat, yelling at every leap, closely followed by the rest with such a deafening din that the boys involuntarily stopped their ears.

"That poor devil will run until it chokes to death, and the rest will follow. By morning there'll not be a wolf, big or little, within fifty miles of this. You can sleep now all you want," said Walt.

His words were true. Not another yelp of wolf was heard that night, and ten minutes after the hideous chorus died away in the distance the boys were soundly sleeping.

CHAPTER IX.

A CUNNING THEFT.

As though some hidden but powerful spring was suddenly touched, Arthur Duncan sat up, never more wide awake than at that moment. Yet he rubbed his eyes again and again, as though reluctant to accept their testimony. The horses were not where they had been left when they lay down to sleep, after disposing of the howling coyotes.

Like a revelation came back to him the memory of Pedrillo's warning and the wild adventures narrated by Walt Harvey only a few hours before. The horse-thieves had been at work, and they were left afoot upon the prairie.

With that he gave Ross a punch in the short ribs with his fist and Walt a vigorous kick, crying:

"You'd lay there snoring and let them steal the teeth out of your head, I do believe! Wake up—the horses are stolen!"

That was enough. The young ranchero arose with an exclamation that sounded very much like an oath, and one glance showing him that

the three horses were not where he had left them just after the death of the panther, he sprung toward the spot, closely followed by the brothers.

"Keep back a little," he muttered, then bent low over the torn and trampled ground, as though he would read the sign and thus solve the mystery.

He made a rapid survey of the ground, then nodded for the brothers to advance.

"Think they were stolen?" questioned Arthur.

"Looks that way, don't it?" was the short reply.

"Maybe they broke loose and strayed away—sort o' stampeded, like," ventured Ross.

"They couldn't have done that without making noise enough to have aroused us if we had been dead drunk, instead of only tired. No, they were helped away; and by old hands at the business, if I ain't mistaken. Look—the picket-pins have been pulled up, not over to one side, as a horse would have done. Here are the footprints of the fellow that did it—a white man, almost certainly, because he wore boots with high heels. Now here, again. There are three sets of tracks, each one leading those of a horse. That shows there were at least three men in the business—"

"Or that one man led the horses away one at a time, to fool us into thinking there were three," said Ross, with a dry little laugh.

"That may be," and as he spoke Walt cast a keen glance at his cousin. "Get your tools and we will follow for a ways and see which is right."

Though the day had not yet fairly dawned, the boys found little difficulty in following the trail over the moist ground as far as the creek, where it entered the water and was lost. It did not cross directly, nor could they discover any signs along the bank above nor below to show where the stolen animals had left the water.

"No fool planned this job," said Walt, at length. "I move we go back to camp and have breakfast. It won't be so very long until Pedrillo comes, and he can double discount me on a blind trail. I believe our shortest way will be to wait for him."

"I don't know about that," and Ross spoke in the same dry tone that had attracted the young ranchero's attention before. "You're too modest by half, cousin Walt. I'd back you against Pedrillo, in this job."

"Thanks for the compliment, even though I don't deserve it."

"The trouble is, you're entirely too modest, cousin Walt. Now I don't often bet, but in this case, I'd lay my Sharp against your Colt that you could, if you would, tell us exactly where those thieves have taken our horses."

"What are you driving at, anyway?" and

Walt stared open-eyed at his cousin. "One would think you were hinting that I stole the animals!"

"I didn't say so, but, just for fun—*didn't* you move the horses after we went to sleep, last night?"

"I pledge you my word that I did not touch the horses after we lay down and went to sleep, last night. Hark! turkeys, as I'm a sinner."

From the further side of the creek came the loud gobble-gobble, tweet-tweet, followed a moment later by a confused fluttering and flapping of wings, as though the birds had just detected the proximity of dangerous neighbors, and had taken to wing."

"It's a pity," observed Ross, stirring up the fire. "If we only had our horses, we might have one of those turkey-chases you have said so much about."

"I said I never touched the horses, but I own up to touching the lariats after you went to sleep," said Walt, with a half-sheepish laugh. "I thought I'd hide the horses and give you a little scare. They're hitched a few rods down the creek. We can have a try for the turkeys yet, though it would be better if we had dogs."

"I knew you did it, and I'll tell you why," laughed Ross. "When you pulled up the picket that held your horse, you knelt down on your right knee, and left a plain imprint of that hole in your pants. Then I saw that your foot was the same size as the track, and that the left heel was a little turned over. These facts, taken with your acting so cool, instead of ripping and cursing, were enough to convince me that you were the thief."

"And that puts the joke on me, instead," laughed Walt. "Well, I'll be more careful the next time. Now, let's get up the horses and have a try at those turkeys."

With rapid steps he led the way to where he had hidden the horses, but as he passed the line of bushes he stopped with an exclamation of astonishment. The animals were gone!

"We'll be too late—burry up," said Arthur, impatiently. "Where did you put the horses?"

"Right here—but they're gone—somebody must have stolen them!"

Ross burst into a hearty laugh, and Walt looked at him with a sudden suspicion. Had he been doubly tricked? For the moment he believed that Ross had been awake when the horses were shifted, and then, watching his chance, had again removed them.

"Upon my word, I did not," Ross said, answering his cousin's thought. "I never knew the horses had been touched until Arthur awoke me. Don't you know where they are?"

"No more than you. I left them here. Somebody must have stolen them in good earnest, this time."

In silence they examined the ground by the first beams of the sun. There was only one clew. Close to where one of the horses had stood, two footprints were clearly outlined. That these were made by moccasined feet, even the boys could see, and as they all wore heavy riding-boots, beyond a doubt these telltale marks were left by the thief. But *how* had he removed them? There was the puzzle. There was only the one set of tracks, leading up from the water, but none going away from the spot.

"I made that trail when I brought the horses here," said Walt. "Somebody has stolen them, that is clear; but *how*? there's not the sign of a trail, that I can see. It looks as though they had taken wings and flown away!"

"Maybe they were soft-shod," suggested Ross. "If their feet were well muffled, they would leave no trail beyond bending down the grass, and the falling dew would soon straighten that up again."

"It may be—it must be, for there's no other way it can be explained, as I see. If Pedrillo only brings out the dogs—"

"I hear the cart and hoof-strokes—there they come!" cried Arthur, peering through the bushes.

"And Pedrillo with them! I'd rather lose a dozen horses than have him know this, after what he said yesterday," and the young ranchero bit his lip angrily.

But there was no help for it, and he had to face the music with the best grace he could summon. Pedrillo said very little; indeed, the brothers thought he acted admirably; but Walt saw the quizzical light in his eyes and the slight curl of the lip, and knew that the *buckaro* was enjoying his discomfiture to the full.

"It was no green hand that did this," was his decision after a careful examination of the ground. "Only the nose of a hound can unravel this."

Walt had reached the same conclusion, though reluctantly enough. He knew that he would have to bear many a rough jest about his attempted practical joke and the strange manner in which it recoiled upon his own head, but there was no other course left him. If Pedrillo could make nothing of the matter, only the sagacity of a well-trained hound could solve the mystery.

So the carcasses of the antelopes and the skin of the panther were put in the wagon, and the cousins followed suit, returning home in a far different humor from that in which they had ridden forth.

Walt sprung out of the wagon the moment they arrived, and started, saddle in hand, to the stable, to secure a fresh mount. He opened the door, then started back, with a cry of amazement. Arthur and Ross

ran to his side and—*before them stood then horses!*

"I promised to pay my debt, senor," the low, soft voice of Pedrillo uttered in his ear.

"You see—I keep my word!"

As he spoke, Pedrillo touched his horse with the spur, and was beyond reach before Walt realized the truth, as he did the next moment. His first impulse was one of anger, but as the full force of the joke burst upon his mind, his hearty laugh joined that of his cousins, though Pedrillo kept out of his way for several days thereafter.

A few words will explain. The horse-breaker had taken the dogs to the ranch, waited until all was quiet, then stole out and rode back to the camp, which he reached just as Walt was removing the horses. Then, waiting until all were asleep, Pedrillo muffled the horses' hoofs, left his footprints as a clew, then led the horses home and put them in the stable without giving the alarm, thanks to the dogs knowing him so well.

It was many days ere Walt heard the last of his practical joke.

CHAPTER X.

FOR A MARKET.

As a general thing, the stock grower disposes of his cattle, either beef or draught, early in the spring, about the time of the general branding of the last year's produce, but there are occasional exceptions, one of which transpired just at this time.

A government contractor was in urgent need of a heavy supply of beeves, and as the market was then but scantily supplied, he made Mr. Harvey an unusually liberal offer for five hundred head of good beef cattle, delivered at River Bend, a station on the Kansas Pacific Railroad. It is needless to say that the offer was promptly accepted, and the ranchero at once set his men to work gathering up his cattle and sorting out the requisite number of four or five year old steers. This was no easy job, coming so close after the Fall "drive," but it was successfully accomplished at length.

Not a little to the delight of Arthur and Ross Duncan, Mr. Harvey decided to send Walt in charge of the cattle to River Bend. Of course they were resolved to form part of the escort. That there would be no little trouble and positive discomfort, they were well aware, but a month of prairie life had hardened and given them self-confidence. They would meet the difficulties and dangers half-way, and fight their way through.

The usual allowance is four herders to every hundred of cattle in the drove, but upon this occasion, owing to the scarcity of hands, and as the route to be followed was not a difficult one, the company consisted of the three cousins, Pe-

drillo and six vaqueros, whose time was up and whose aid would not be required after this drive until spring opened. They were to be paid off at River Bend, when the cattle were turned over to the contractor.

As may readily be imagined, it was no easy task to tear those five hundred and odd cattle away from the grounds where they had been born and reared. For a little while they would proceed quietly, but then, as though the movement was preconcerted, they would break and scatter in every direction, seeking to regain their old stamping grounds and the associates from whom they had been separated. Nor was it until after the whole force of the stock-farm had turned out, that the drove was fairly started on its way to market.

"Now it will be all plain sailing," said Walt, as they sat around the fire, eating their breakfast in the early dawn. "After the first day and night out, we never have any serious trouble. We may lose a few head by straying, or in the sloughs, but that we expect, and put in enough extra head on starting to make up for the losses on the way."

But the young ranchero, though speaking from experience, was no true prophet on this occasion. Instead of being at the end, the troubles and dangers of that trip had not yet begun.

The choice of two trails was offered them, one about fifty miles longer than the other. This, the longest, was the route generally pursued, as it avoided the low lands; but the season had been unusually dry and free of rain, and Walt feared the cattle would suffer for want of water along the longer route, and to guard against this, he chose the other trail.

As the sun rose the cattle were gently started from their feeding, and driven leisurely along until noon, when there was a halt for rest and dinner. Then on again until near sunset, each halt being made where there was plenty of water and grazing, if possible. The horses were staked out at night, and the ten men kept watch and watch. That is, five of them were on guard until eleven o'clock, when they were relieved by the other squad until half-past two; then the first watch came on again, rousing the others at the first break of dawn to prepare breakfast, so that the day's drive could begin about sunrise.

After the second day's drive Arthur and Ross were inclined to grumble. All that day the cattle had plodded on with provoking quietness, and nothing occurred to break the full monotony. But upon this, the third day, ample amends were made.

Just before noon they came upon one of those natural curiosities, a "hog-wallow" prairie. The soil was black as ink. As far as the eye could see, were countless depressions in the surface, from two to six yards in diameter,

and from three to eight feet in depth, the center of each being a mass of miry mud. This mud was very tenacious, and as the horses were forced to pass through one of the wallows, the lifting of each hoof was followed by a crack as loud as that of a pistol.

There was no choice but to cross this vast "hog-fen," since to skirt it would entail the loss of two days.

Until near the center all went all, but it was easily seen that trouble was brewing. A steer would almost bog in one of the wallows. Others would press upon him, using horns quite freely, pushing, goring and lowing with growing excitement.

The experienced herders saw this, and knowing that a reckless stampede would certainly follow, the word was passed, and pressing close upon rear and flanks, they plied their whips with furious yells. Since the stampede was inevitable, it should be turned to good account, if they could only give it the desired direction.

The yells and lashing proved sufficient. With previous bellowings the cattle plunged madly forward in full career. Close behind came the riders to prevent a change of course, but a few minutes of that reckless riding was sufficient to satisfy the veriest glutton of them all. Before the middle of the hog-wallow prairie was reached, only three men kept the saddle. Arthur and Ross were thrown into the center of the same foul-smelling wallow by their stumbling horses, but fortunately neither was much injured. Walt easily secured their animals, and remounting, the boys advanced with more caution.

The hog-wallow prairie was passed over without serious accident, but then it was found that, instead of their troubles being ended, they had just begun.

Just beyond the hog-wallows lay an extensive slough, only, nearly twenty feet lower than the former level, and consequently hidden from view until one was fairly upon the verge of the steep, crumbling bank.

Straight on the cattle plunged, down the bank, over the thin line of reeds and bushes and into the watery ooze. There was no such thing as stopping upon the brink. Those in the rear pushed blindly on, each taking its scrambling leap without hesitation.

Hard upon the heels of the cattle came the horsemen. They could see that there was water and mud ahead, but could make out little more, thanks to the crowded cattle that floundered furiously toward the further side.

A number had succeeded in crossing, and, worried by the fierce struggle, were subsiding into a trot, showing that the fury of the stampede was at an end.

Where cattle could cross, so could horses. Thus reasoned the herders, and they took the plunge, with shouts of reckless merriment.

Their tune was quickly changed. The passing cattle had trodden the never secure bottom into a perfect quagmire, and the horses sunk to their bellies in clinging mud, the water reaching their withers.

With a warning shout, Walt and Pedrillo threw themselves out of their saddles, as the only chance of saving their horses from being smothered. Their example was speedily followed by all, but the situation did not seem much improved.

They stood breast-deep in the mud and water, forty feet from the bank, and hardly able to advance an inch at a time, while their struggles, by softening the mire beneath them, sunk them deeper at every step.

Nor was this the only danger. Close ahead of them were a dozen or more bogged cattle. As though angered by the shouts and struggles behind them, several of these long-horned furies had turned around, and were now straining every nerve to get at their natural enemies, their eyes wickedly glowing as they snorted, lowed and shook their heavily-armed heads.

Whether cattle can navigate better in a bog than horses, I do not pretend to decide, but this much is clear: the long-horns were momentarily gaining upon Pedrillo and his horse, these two chancing to be the nearest them. The *buickaro* might have escaped, but he would not desert his idolized black, cheering it on and guiding it by the halter, at imminent danger to himself from the plunging hoofs, paying no attention to the warning yells of his comrades.

It was plain that, if left to themselves, the long horn would overtake the black mustang, and either kill or cripple it before firm ground could be reached.

Pedrillo saw this as well as the others, and drawing a revolver, he snapped each barrel, in succession, at the mad creature, but without one exploding. Flinging the useless weapon to land, he removed the lasso from the saddle, and, though with difficulty, flung the noose around the stump of a stout bush, then drew his knife and awaited the approach of the long-horn, as though he intended giving it battle single-handed.

He had no time to wait. Eager to wreak its rage upon some living object, the mad steer plunged forward, but just as it came within arm's length, Pedrillo leaned forward and made several strong slashes in swift succession.

The steer gave a frightful bellow of pain, and plunged furiously onward, but Pedrillo grasped the lasso and flinging his whole strength into the effort, dragged himself clear of the clinging mire, and slid swiftly along the muddy surface to land.

An enthusiastic cheer arose from the spectators. The mad steer was blinded and helpless.

Pedrillo had severed both eyeballs with his trusty knife!

CHAPTER XI.

THE STAMPEDE.

THE boys had watched this tragi-comical scene with breathless interest, for the moment almost forgetting their own uncomfortable situation, and quite oblivious to the fact that at any instant one or all of them might be assailed in the self-same manner by some of the plunging, struggling cattle, whose heads and horns and wriggling line of back alone showed above the mud-thickened water.

A united cheer, followed by a hearty burst of laughter, greeted the blinding of the infuriated steer and the ludicrous manner in which Pedrillo "scoted" along the surface, pausing only when his head made a deep impression upon the soft clay of the shelving bank.

This explosion was natural enough, but it bade fair to end disagreeably. Whether maddened beyond endurance by the sounds of the hated voices, or because instinct told them that it would be easier to regain solid ground by turning back than to plunge and flounder straight on, two steers turned and headed straight for the cousins. They saw their danger in the recent experience of Pedrillo, and forgetting all else save the one ardent wish to feel solid earth once more beneath their feet, the way those boys did send the mud and water flying behind them, would not have disgraced a stern-wheel steamboat stuck upon a sand-bar.

Pedrillo saw and realized their peril, and for the moment he forgot that his loved mustang was not yet out of danger. Coiling up his lasso, he floundered along until abreast the frantically struggling lads, then sent the noose over the head of the young ranchero, who was in the greatest apparent danger of being overtaken by the infuriated long horns. But Walt was voluntarily keeping the post of honor, and removing the noose, tossed it around Arthur's neck.

"Slip it under your arm—now pull, Pedrillo!"

Pedrillo did pull, and with a will. The lad felt as though he was being lengthened out like an animated telescope—then he shot ahead so swiftly over the muddy water that his head was buried ear-deep in the soft bank.

After this, under their united strength, it was a comparatively easy task to extricate the other two, when it was found that all but two of the six herders had regained the bank. As these two were in no particular danger, they were bidden wait with what patience they could summon, while some of the horses were extricated from their miry bed.

This was a work of time and patience. Pedrillo cast the noose of his lasso around the

neck of his mustang, then pulled steadily upon it while the animal floundered toward land, slackening every few moments to allow it to breathe. This course, with slight variations, was followed with the others, and by mid-afternoon the last horse reached *terra firma*. Several of the steers were extricated in the same manner, but there were half a score left in the bog, to escape or die as fate willed. The safety of the main drove could not be hazarded on the desperate chance of saving so few.

"You see now why we started with a score or two of extra cattle," said Walt, as he gave the word to advance. "We always calculate to lose about one-twentieth on the road, either by straying or accident."

The few rescued cattle were driven up the edge of the slough to a point beyond where the others had crossed, and by dint of hard, persevering work, were forced to take to the water. The riders plunged boldly in after them, and though the crossing was hard work, one and all gained the further bank in safety.

"Whenever I drive cattle over that trail again, may I stick in the middle of that slough until I take root!" growled Walt, shaking his clinched fist at the treacherous bog.

None of the party were in a very amiable humor. Plastered with unsavory mud from head to foot; boots, pockets, ears nose and mouth full of the same, while every nerve and muscle ached dully with the terrible strain they had been subjected to, they surely were not much to blame if they felt cross, snappish and generally disagreeable.

There was no time for rest and renovation. The cattle were scattered far and wide, and it was absolutely necessary to collect them before nightfall.

"You two had better keep right on after the main body," said Walt, to his cousins. "Don't press them. They'll stop when they come to good grazing, I guess."

Both Ross and Arthur were quite willing. Though no shirks, they did not relish the idea of a long and reckless ride after what they had passed through. If the reader has ever ridden with his clothes full of slimy, sticky mud, he can appreciate their objections to a race after wild, fleet and obstinate cattle.

An hour later the brothers found themselves upon the bank of a prairie stream, along which the cattle fell to grazing. Without a word they rode into the water and fell to cleansing themselves, their clothes, saddles and horses. The water was cool, but they did not mind that. After a deal of vigorous scrubbing they emerged and, building a fire in a sheltered nook among the stunted trees, stripped and hung up their garments to dry.

It was not long afterward that Walt and his men made their appearance, driving before them the long-horns. It had been no very

difficult task to collect them, jaded as they were by the trying run across the hog-wallow prairie and the killing struggle through the slough, and they were willing enough to join the main herd in grazing upon the nutritious grass.

Walt, Pedrillo and the herders speedily followed the example of the brothers and washed away the thickest of the mud, then crowded around the comfortable fire in nature's own dress, while their garments were drying. Good humor was once more restored, for all believed that their trials were over. Jokes and jests flew from lip to lip, but none were barbed with malice, and all were received in the same spirit as delivered.

As none of the party had broken their fast since early dawn, preparations were at once begun for an early supper. But the fates were against them. That night was to be one of fasting, amid its other horrors.

"Seems to me it's getting mighty chilly, all of a sudden," said Ross, crowding closer to the fire. "Ain't going to have a storm, are we?"

A general glance was cast upward, where the sky could be seen through the tree-tops. Not a cloud was visible; the sky was blue, the sun was shining clear and brightly. The idea of a storm seemed preposterous. And yet—the air was growing chilly—

"There's a big fire up north," said Arthur, coming back from the open ground. "The smoke is black as ink—"

Both Pedrillo and Walt sprang to their feet, the same idea written upon both faces. They hastened through the bushes, and one glance showed them the truth.

Not a mile distant rose a huge black cloud, clinging to the earth and rising to the very heavens; a cloud, but not one born of fire.

"A norther—a norther!" they both shouted, and rushing back to camp, Walt added: "On with your clothes—quick! do you want to freeze to death?"

Not so Pedrillo. Naked as he was, he darted to where his horse was picketed, and wrenching up the pin, strove to lead the terrified animal under shelter. Then—words are powerless to describe the fearful scene.

The tornado burst with a deafening roar and howling shrieks. The boys were thrown flat. The firebrands were caught up and hurled far away through the trees. The light of the sun was blotted out, and darkness the most intense enveloped the earth. Breath was taken away—the end of the world seemed at hand.

It was but the first breath of the norther followed by a silence and lull almost awful in its startling contrast. But Pedrillo took instant advantage of it.

"Finish dressing!" he cried. "Then secure the horses!"

There was time given them for the first portion of the advice, and, numbed in every limb, all hurriedly donned such clothing as had not been torn from their grasp.

The cattle and horses, no less than their masters, knew what that furious blast was the advance guard of, and no sooner did the lull come, than a blind, headlong stampede took place. With heads down and tails up, the cattle, belching furiously, broke away and plunged through the shallow stream. The horses covered under the first blast, then when the lull came, reared back and tore their pickets from the soil. With almost human screams of terror, they followed the stampeded cattle.

"I'll follow, catch and stake out the horses for you," cried Pedrillo, leaping upon his mustang, half-naked as he was. "Come on!"

He plunged through the stream—the six herders followed. Walt restrained his cousins.

"It would be death to you," he said, earnestly. "You must lie close—"

The rest of the words were unheard or unuttered. The norther was upon them in all its fury. A sheet of rain that almost beat them to the earth—then a pelting volley of ragged hailstones—followed by a blinding drift of snow.

Walt grasped the blankets and crawled under the lee of a pile of brush, closely followed by his cousins. Huddling close together, holding the edges of the blankets tightly beneath them, they lay with the terrible storm beating upon them, growing colder with each passing minute, until they began to fear that the very blood in their veins would turn to ice.

Walt shuddered as he thought of the hours, even days, that might pass before the norther exhausted itself. He had known one to last a week without a minute's intermission. What if this should be such a one?

God help them all, if it was!

CHAPTER XII. TROUBLE BREWING.

ONLY those who have experienced the icy breath of a full-blown norther can appreciate the pluck shown by Pedrillo, the horse-tamer, in leaving tolerable cover to chase the runaway horses, while he was only half-clad, and those garments already wet through.

It is not from its intense cold that the norther is so dangerous and so greatly dreaded, for it is very rare that the mercury falls to zero. It is the sudden change that lends it terror. At one hour the sky may be clear and unclouded, the sun shining warmly, the air soft and balmy, with the thermometer ranging about 70°; and the next hour the mercury may be far below freezing point. The duration of a norther may be one hour, or it may be one

hundred. They come without warning and go almost as suddenly.

Pedrillo knew—none better—the great risk he was running, but he was that *rara avis*, a thoroughly faithful and trustworthy Mexican. He was the real, though Walt was the nominal commander of the drive. The moment they reached River Bend, his responsibility would cease, but until then, Pedrillo felt that he was accountable for the long-horns.

With those hurried directions to the six herders, then, he dashed across the shallow stream, and thundered after the dust-enveloped cattle. Even in that thrilling and anxious moment, he felt a certain grim satisfaction in the thought that the stampeding long-horns were heading directly toward their market. After all, if the norther did not rage too long, it might prove a positive benefit by saving a day or two of difficult driving.

Pedrillo did not need to urge his horse along. Scarcely less terrified than those in advance, it was fleeing from the cruel norther at top speed. But faster still came the cutting blast, bearing upon its wings the pelting rain, the driving hail and the blinding snow. The horse tamer bowed before the bitter blast, but only for a moment.

Close before him ran two of the escaped horses, and he only thought of self-imposed duty. Ranging alongside, he bent over and caught the long trailing picket rope, hastily wrapping it around the pommel of his saddle, reining in his own horse. At the pluck of the stout lariat, the horse halted, almost thrown to the ground.

Pedrillo dismounted and drove the iron picket pin firmly in the ground, then hastened on in pursuit of the other horse. But here he was foiled in a manner little short of marvelous.

As he forged alongside and stooped to grasp the trailing rope the horse swerved sharply, and he missed his aim. The next moment Pedrillo heard something whistle shrilly past his ear, and the *estampelo* gave a sharp neigh of pain and plunged headlong to the ground.

As Pedrillo hastened to secure his prize, he found that death was before him. The pointed picket-pin of iron was buried in the animal's brain!

Just how it occurred, cannot be clearly explained. Probably the pin caught upon some root or stub, and being forcibly jerked free, the elastic lariat cast the picket-pin far ahead, and chance directed its point.

It may be remarked in passing that this is one of the most serious dangers attending a stampede of horses that have been staked out. Ugly wounds, and often death, are the consequences.

The cold seemed to be growing momentarily more intense. The snow, mingled with cutting

sleet, came down in blinding drifts. One could not see objects ten yards in advance.

Pedrillo was chilled to the bone, but he did not flinch. Feeling all confidence in his horse, he bowed to the blast and gave free rein.

Ten minutes later the black mustang wheeled sharply to the right and plunged into a mass of dense undergrowth. Almost brushed from the saddle, Pedrillo drew rein. Against either leg he felt the quivering pressure of living flesh, and stooping, he found his horse had pressed up between two horses.

Eyesight was of little avail, but his ears told him enough. His mustang had sought shelter from the storm under the lee of a timber island—the very same to which the instinct of the stampeded horses had brought them.

Pedrillo dismounted, and, as well as his benumbed condition would admit, tied up the horses he had so strangely stumbled upon. Then he returned and made the black mustang lie down, and curling himself up between its legs, crowding close to its stomach, he awaited the coming of dawn or the lulling of the norther, with what philosophy he could muster.

Fortunately for all concerned, the storm was as short lived as it was furious, else another tragedy would have been added to the countless scores that form the dark side of Western life. By midnight the snow ceased falling, and the wind died away. Before daybreak, the atmosphere was barely at freezing point, and before noon, every flake of snow had vanished before the warm breath of the glowing sun.

Pedrillo did not wait for day, though. As soon as the storm broke, he secured the horses and set out for camp, uttering, a long, shrill yell every few moments, as a signal for the six herders. Before he had retraced his steps two miles, he had picked them all up, and together they rode back to the camp.

Their loud cries did not receive any answer, and Pedrillo plunged into the thicket fearing the worst. His suspense was not of long duration. He saw the blankets, and as his trembling hands grasped them, the cousins awoke! Chilled and stupefied by the intense cold, they had fallen asleep in each other's arms, nor knew that the storm was ended until Pedrillo awakened them. Had the norther continued, that sleep would have been the sleep of death; as it was, they did not even suffer from a cold or a sore throat in consequence.

The first thing was to build a fire, which patient perseverance finally effected, and then to boil some coffee. This, and a generous breakfast, quickly removed all signs of stiffness, and when the sun arose, it found all concerned as sound and gay-spirited as ever in life.

Without much delay the party mounted and set out in pursuit of the stampeded long-horns, overtaking the hindermost of the drove about

noon. These were languidly feeding, not yet recovered from the fatigue of their blind, headlong race. Starting them on, the brothers and the herder whose horse had been killed, kept them going, while the others set off to collect the estrays.

It was not until noon of the following day that the entire herd was collected. Half a dozen were missing, the majority of which were dead, in most cases, having literally run themselves to death.

"You see now why we put in so many extra head," said Walt, as they went into camp for the last time before reaching their market. "We lose more or less on every drive, though, I must confess, this trip has been an unusually tough one."

But its trials were fairly over. By noon of the next day, the lively little town of River Bend was reached, and before sunset, the cattle were turned over to the contractor, and Walt had the money safe in his belt.

There was little to be seen in the town, though Pedrillo managed to find a lively game of *monte* that held him captive until his pockets were turned wrong side out, and after paying off the six vaqueros, Walt and his cousins sought out a resting-place for the night in a rude, ill-kept hotel—but the best the town could boast.

Knowing that there were many rough customers around, the young ranchero had cautioned his men about divulging the fact of his being in possession of so much money, but his precautions were useless.

The contractor was well-known, in addition to the fact that he was buying for the Government, as well as the fact that it was his custom to pay cash down. Still, the truth might have been concealed, so careful had Walt been, but for one thing.

Wearied by their hard work of the past week, the cousins sought their beds early, but near midnight, the young ranchero was awakened by the sound of some one trying the door of the chamber. He grasped his revolver and sat up in bed, but the rickety couch gave a doleful creak.

"Boss—let me in," came a soft whisper, in a voice that he instantly recognized. "It's me—Tom Davis."

That was enough. The man was beyond suspicion, and arising, Walt opened the door and gave him admission.

"Well, what's in the wind, now?" he demanded, somewhat impatiently, as the fellow hesitated.

"I thought you'd ought to know, though I hate to split on a pard, boss. If I tell you, you won't ax me to tell any names?"

"Not if I can help it. If you say there's no need of mentioning names, I'll take your word for it, Tom."

"I wouldn't ax it, only the critter was

drunk, an' didn't rightly know what he was sayin'—"

"So! there's been talk about the money?"

"I'm afeard so, boss. Some ugly-looking critters got one o' the boys drunk, an' was pumpin' him, when I lit onto 'em. I smoked thar trick, an' tried the best I knowed how to pick a fuss onto 'em, but they slid off afore I could think o' any excuse for to bounce 'em. I lowed you'd ought to know, an' so tuck the liberty o' comin' to say, ef you want, we'll all see you safe home to the ranch—"

"Many thanks, Tom, but I don't believe there's any need. We're four, well armed and mounted, and now you've put us on our guard, we can take care of ourselves. But mind: you're to come back to us in the spring."

"Ef I'm alive I'll be thar—sure!"

The honest fellow departed, and Walt lay down again. But his sleeping moments were few indeed, despite his weary bones.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PLAUSIBLE RASCAL.

WALT HARVEY did a great deal more thinking than sleeping the remainder of that night.

He had over eight thousand dollars belted around his waist; enough to reward a score of murders where life was at a higher premium than here. Had he been some dozen years older, his course would have been simple enough. He would have at once sought out the six men he had just paid off, and with them as escort, ridden hard for home. But Walt was too young to think more than once of this prudent plan. To his hot blood this prudence savored strongly of cowardice.

By the time day dawned, Walt had decided to say nothing of the midnight visit and warning to any save Pedrillo. Not that he doubted the good-will or courage of his cousins, but he did their self-control.

"We will return the way we came," he said to the horse-tamer, as they looked to the animals. "There's less chance for an ambush there, and that's all we need care for. In a fair fight we four ought to be able to clean out a dozen of these hounds."

"You think they will fight?" and Pedrillo cast a meaning glance toward Ross and Arthur Duncan.

"I know it," said Walt, with a quiet emphasis. "There's not a drop of white blood in the stock they come from. Not a word more—mind."

The boys were willing enough to leave River Bend. Bustling though the station was, it possessed no attractions equal to the wild, free life of the stock-farm, and the brothers were in high glee as they rode out of town and gave their mettled horses free rein for a race over the springy turf.

After that first burst, Pedrillo took the lead and maintained it until the noon halt. Walt was unusually loquacious, and kept the brothers so busy discussing the plans offered for their future amusement, that they never once noticed the roundabout course taken by Pedrillo, he never once passing within a quarter of a mile of any timber, undergrowth or prairie "draw" large enough to afford an ambush for an enemy, though by such caution the length of their journey bade fair to be almost doubled.

But the forenoon passed away without any signs of the expected enemy, and realizing the importance of keeping their horses in readiness for a bit of hot and stern work, Walt called a halt beside a narrow, shallow stream. The banks were too low to cover an enemy, and the level plane was open to their view for a mile or more in every direction.

The meal was scarcely begun, when Ross exclaimed:

"That fellow's in a mighty hurry, whoever he is!"

Riding at full speed, and apparently following their trail, came a horseman. Pedrillo and Walt interchanged quick glances, but said not a word. The rider was alone. If their suspicions were true, there was ample time to act.

The stranger dismounted and staked out his horse, taking off saddle and bridle, then approached the fire, and, squatting down, coolly helped himself to a cup of boiling hot coffee, a chunk of meat and corn-bread, with never a word or nod of greeting. Ross and Arthur smiled audibly at his free-and-easy impudence, but if their laugh was heard it was not noticed.

The stranger's dress and appearance were in perfect keeping with his cool assurance. Buckskin pants and moccasins; red flannel shirt, open at the throat, soft felt hat, the brim of which drooped almost to his shoulders; all of which were much the worse for wear.

A brace of revolvers and a stout knife were belted around his waist. His hair and beard were long and iron-gray, as near as could be told through the thick covering of sand and dust. His eyes were small, black and remarkably keen.

"I began to think I'd never catch up with you," were his first words, nodding toward the young ranchero.

"You followed us, then, from town?"

"Yes. How's the old man—your father?"

"Lively—when I last saw him. You knew him?"

"I used to. We were like two brothers, in the old times—before you made your appearance, though. I saw you come in town yesterday. Asked your name, and found out that you were the son of my old friend, Frank Har-

vey. Had a dream last night of old times, and resolved to call on Frank. You were gone—I followed, and here I am. Fine drove you brought in, that. But you're foolish, carrying so much money around with you, where there's so many rascals running around loose. If Black Bob should get wind of it, I wouldn't give much for your chances."

"As long as you're on our side, I don't think there's anything to be afraid of, at least from Black Bob," said Walt, quietly.

The stranger cast a quick look at the young ranchero, then his lips parted in a silent but hearty laugh.

It is not necessary to record in full the conversation that followed. Enough that Pardon Goodman, as the stranger finally introduced himself, declared his intention of accompanying them to the ranch of his old friend. No objections were raised, though a meaning glance passed between Pedrillo and the young ranchero, and while catching up their horses, these twain had a short but pointed conversation, the purport of which will appear in due time.

Arthur and Ross were both greatly taken with the glib and racy talk of Pardon Goodman, and before they had left the camp two miles behind them, the trio were upon the best of terms. Even Walt, despite his strong suspicions, could not help feeling a certain interest in the old fellow's talk. Apparently he had been everywhere and knew a little of everything. He could tell an admirable story, and only on second thoughts could the boys doubt the perfect truth of the wonderful adventures he had passed through, according to himself.

"You think that is a tough one?" he chuckled, after describing a fairly marvelous shot he had once made. "Just watch the next jack-rabbit that gets up—"

Even as he spoke a "mule" was startled from its form and sprung away with wonderfully long and stiff-legged leaps, its huge, black-tipped ears lying flat along its shoulders. But swifter still sped a bullet from the old man's revolver, and the "mule" rolled over and over, a lifeless heap.

"Through the head, or I'll swallow him whole!" cried Goodman, with a shrill, unpleasant laugh.

Walt stooped low and picked up the almost headless rabbit. Unless a chance shot, the feat was a really remarkable one.

As before, Pedrillo rode in advance, and carefully avoided all possible ambushes. If Pardon Goodman noticed this fact, he made no remarks, seemingly content to follow the horse-tamer's lead. His tongue was never idle. His stock of queer, ludicrous or exciting stories seemed inexhaustible. The brothers had never enjoyed a ride more in their lives. By sunset they were ready to swear that their new ac-

quaintance was the finest fellow upon the footstool.

Walt wavered between this opinion and the one he had first formed. He would be almost convinced that the old fellow was indeed what he claimed to be, but then a word, a glance, would recall the old suspicion with redoubled force.

Not so Pedrillo. At first glance he felt sure that he had met the fellow before, but he could not place him until "Black Bob" was named. Then all doubts were cast to the winds. That notorious desperado upon whose head three different rewards were set, was none other than the self-termed Pardon Goodman. He might be one of those men included in the warning of the past night, or he might be working single-handed for the rich reward. Whichever might be the case, Pedrillo resolved that the biter should be bit.

Not a chance did he throw away that day, and when the sun was setting and the time drew near for going into camp, he motioned the others to halt, while he rode ahead to inspect the ford and the undergrowth which lined the banks of the river. The way was clear, and at his signal, the rest rode on. Crossing over, only pausing to water the animals, Pedrillo led the way out upon the open prairie full half a mile from the timber, before drawing rein.

"You camp a good way from wood and water," dryly observed Pardon Goodman. "Afraid of musketoes, I suppose?"

"No; to guard against snakes," replied Walt, as he watched his opportunity to speak with Pedrillo.

The assertion of the horse-tamer that the stranger was none other than Black Bob, decided the course of the young ranchero, and before the two parted, their plan of action was fully understood.

A fire was kindled from wood brought from the timber, and supper was cooked and eaten as quietly as though everything was above-board. To all appearance the old man did not suspect anything of the plot against him, and a constant succession of droll stories rolled from his tongue. Arthur and Ross laughed until their sides ached, nor did Walt appear less amused.

Muttering something about changing the position of his horse, Pedrillo arose and glided away through the darkness. The stranger cast a sharp glance after him, and shifted his position as though ill at ease. Walt's heart beat fast, as his hand stole toward his pistol; but there was no need for him to draw it.

Pedrillo shifted his horse, then retraced his steps, humming a bar from a Spanish love-song. The old man glanced over his shoulder, but he was an instant too late.

The Mexican's lasso whistled through the air,

and the fellow's arms were pinned tightly to his side as he was hurled heavily backward. Walt sprung upon him and tore the weapons from his belt.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PHILOSOPHICAL PRISONER.

ALL this was done so swiftly and adroitly that before Arthur or Ross Duncan could interfere or help, Pardon Goodman lay bound and disarmed at the feet of Walt and Pedrillo. To say that they were surprised gives no idea of their amazement at this sudden change, and, to them, inexcusable outrage.

The young ranchero saw something of this in their faces, and, true to his straightforward nature, he set himself right in their estimation without any circumlocution, first telling them of the warning he had received on the night before.

"At first glance I had no doubt that this fellow was one of the scoundrels Tom Davis told me about, and if you will only take the trouble to look back and recall his looks, his words and actions, I believe you will agree with me. Else why was he so anxious to learn all about the money and such things?"

"But that isn't all. Pedrillo, here, recognized him, and is willing to swear that he is none other than Black Bob, the biggest scoundrel this side o' monkey heaven. That settled it. Of course, there was only one reason for his sticking so close to us—the money I carry; and, equally of course, I made up my mind he shouldn't have it. We watched our chance, and here is the result."

Both Arthur and Ross were convinced before the young ranchero concluded, and they eyed the prisoner with far different feelings from those of a few minutes before.

While Walt was speaking the fellow listened with a strange intentness, and the many swift changes which swept over his countenance were well worth observing.

"You make out a pretty fair case, young man," he said, when Walt paused; "but you're barking up the wrong tree, nevertheless. I'm no more Black Bob than you are, and, if we both live long enough, you shall apologize to me for calling me by that name. I told you once that I am an old and loved friend of your father. What must he be if I am the rascal you say?"

"It will be lucky for you if you can prove that," said Walt, with a short laugh.

"Take me before him, and if he don't say that you are making an unmitigated ass of yourself, I'll own up to being Black Bob or any other scoundrel you may choose to call me."

"I intend to take you there—dead or alive," was the blunt response. "If you have any understanding with your friends, pray that they fail you, for I pledge you any word, that

at the first sign of trouble, or an attempted rescue, I'll blow your brains out."

"You are very kind, young man. May I ask another favor? If you will brace me up against my saddle, and fill and light my pipe for me—"

"I hate to refuse a dear friend of my father anything, but as we break camp at once, what you ask is out of the question," said Walt, with mock regret.

Determined to be on the safe side, Walt and Pedrillo had resolved to push on through the night a few miles further, hoping thus to effectually rid themselves of whatever confederates the prisoner might have lurking around. The horses had had nearly two hours' grazing, and were rested sufficiently for the purpose. The camp-fire was allowed to burn down low, although it still gave out enough light to serve as a beacon for several miles around. If, as they suspected, the prisoner had friends lurking around in wait for his signal, they would probably lie low beyond range, nor suspect anything had gone wrong, for several hours, at least.

Pedrillo caught up the horses and prepared them for the road at a goodly distance from the fire. The legs of the prisoner were unbound, and at the muzzle of a pistol he walked out to his horse. Mounting, his ankles were firmly tied together beneath his horse's belly, and the little cavalcade rode silently away through the night, nor drew rein until they were half a dozen miles from the scene of the capture.

There was only one in the party that slept comfortably that night. That one was Pardon Goodman, the prisoner. More than once he laughed low and softly, and, until sharply ordered to hold his tongue, he cracked jokes and told marvelous stories exactly as he did during the afternoon ride.

Walt could not understand it. Could it be that Pedrillo was mistaken? that this was really an honest traveler, a friend of his father? Or was all this dry mirth a counterfeit? Did he hope to throw them off their guard, and thus gain an opportunity to escape? or were his friends in front, and his mirth caused by the haste in which his intended victims were pressing to their fate?

It was all a puzzle, and when day dawned, Walt was no nearer the true solution than at first.

The prisoner was still the gayest of the party at breakfast, and his grim jests made even Pedrillo smile more than once.

But little time was cut to waste, and as the sun arose, all was in readiness and they resumed their journey.

It was decided to halt for noon upon the hog-wallow prairie, and in hopes of reaching a better point for crossing the slough, they bore

sharply to the left. But it was fated they were not to cross over without an interruption.

A clear, ringing shout came to their ears, and a single horseman was seen spurring along the opposite bank, swinging his hat in great excitement.

Walt drew close to the side of his prisoner, and the sharp click of his pistol spoke louder than words.

"If that is one of your friends, Black Bob, I'm sorry for you," he said, with a grim emphasis.

"To my knowledge I never saw him before in my life," was the cool and prompt response.

"It is Dan Keywood," muttered Pedrillo, as the horseman came nearer.

Walt, when convinced that the horse-breaker had spoken the truth, uncocked and replaced his pistol with an air of positive relief. He could now recognize the features of the man, and knew him for one who had, until that same spring, served his father as herdsman. His only fault was that of being too hot-headed and prone to fighting. After he had soundly thrashed one half of his fellow vaqueros, Mr. Harvey felt compelled to discharge him, but not until he had secured him a berth with Mr. Jones.

"Come on over!" cried the man, while yet some distance below them. "They's a man mired down thar—I can't git him out alone. Make haste, or he's a gone case, sure!"

"It may be a trap for you—look out," said the prisoner, in a quick, earnest tone.

Walt glanced at him curiously, and saw, or fancied that he saw, genuine uneasiness in his eyes. What could cause this, save a fear that this re-enforcement would render his escape more difficult, if not quite impossible?

"Bring him along, Pedrillo—and watch him close!" he cried, plunging into the muddy water and floundering across the slough. "How, Dan? Who is it bogged? Can't you rope him out?"

"It's Van Fassen. The fool would cross at the old ford, though I knowed they wasn't no bottom. His critter got stuck, an' somehow Van got his leg twisted under the brute, an' cain't but jist keep his head above water. I hed to shoot the hoss, or he'd 'a' rolled Van under. We tried the rope, but 'twouldn't do, an' I was jist settin' off a'ter help, when you came in sight."

While giving this explanation, Keywood led the way at a rapid trot along the edge of the slough, and as he ended, they came in sight of the bogged man and horse. Keywood uttered a loud shout, as though to encourage his friend. At the same moment a cry came from behind, and turning his head, Walt saw Pedrillo making a wild gesture, as though danger was at hand.

But the warning came too late. A man up-

rose from the reeds and grass just above Walt, and a lasso whistled through the air. Instinctively he threw up an arm to guard his head, but in vain. The noose settled around him and he was plucked forcibly from the saddle.

Dan Keywood instantly sprang to the ground and holding a cocked revolver at the young ranchero's head, motioned back his friends.

"Halt! at the first move I'll blow the boy's brains to thunder!" he yelled, adding an oath to give his words weight.

As he spoke, four men sprang from their ambush in one of the hog-wallows, and hastened to join him. The man who had pretended to be mired, floundered to shore, and ran up to his friends, and half a score of pistols covered Pedrillo and the brothers.

"Fire and charge—" began Walt, but Keywood clapped his hand over the lad's mouth, and repeated his threat to blow out his brains at the first move toward a rescue.

"Make 'em turn me loose!" yelled Pardon Goodman. "I'm Black Bob—"

"Ride up here! Ef they try to stop ye, I'll kill this cub," cried Keywood, with a sounding oath.

Pedrillo and his young friends were helpless. He knew that Keywood would certainly keep his bloody threat, and they could only submit. With a mocking laugh, their late captive rode away and joined the villains.

"Cut me loose—quick!" he muttered, with an oath. "We musn't let them critters git away, or they'll hev the hull country down on us. Give me that whelp's pistols, an' I'll stan' by ye to the last!"

His bonds were cut, and, leaping to the ground, he snatched the revolvers from Walt's belt, cocking them both.

CHAPTER XV.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

MATTERS looked black indeed for our friends.

Walt Harvey lay helpless beneath the crushing pressure of Dan Keywood's knees, the muzzle of a cocked revolver almost touching his temple. Pedrillo, Ross and Arthur were held at bay by the leveled pistols of the five ruffians—not counting in the old fellow who had declared himself the notorious outlaw and desperado, Black Bob. Though nominally free and armed, they were well-nigh as helpless as the half-stunned ranchero.

"Keep 'em kivered, but wait for the word," cried Black Bob, taking command as a matter of course.

Dan Keywood did not relish this. The cunning plot was of his own formation, and he did not choose to have an outsider step in and bear off the honors, to say nothing of a share of the money. He half-turned his head to hurl a curse

at this audacious recruit, but the words never left his lips.

With a force and dexterity that a mule might have envied, Black Bob planted his foot under the bushy red beard with a kick that hurled the treacherous herdsman end over end into the edge of the slough where he lay quivering, senseless, the blood gushing from mouth and nostrils.

Nor was the old man satisfied with this exploit. Ere the five men beside him could realize what had occurred, he turned the muzzles of his pistols upon them, and opened fire, working the weapons with a speed and dexterity that was fairly marvelous.

Pedrillo saw the kick that placed Dan Keywood *hors du combat*, and, though he was far from comprehending the whole truth, he eagerly snatched at the faint hope of rescuing his young friend and master. Bending low in the saddle, he urged his horse forward, resolved to do or die.

Close to his heels came Arthur and Ross, pale and excited, but with never a personal fear. As Walt said, they came of good stock, and would never do dishonor to their race.

There was little for them to do, however, on this occasion. The outlaws were so completely taken by surprise that ere they realized the fact that their supposed ally was an enemy, two of their number fell dead in their tracks.

The survivors did fire a shot or two, but that was purely mechanical, as they were too thoroughly bewildered to think of self-defense, much less offensive action.

Before Pedrillo could reach the spot the affair was at an end. Three men were dead, one wounded, the fifth was prostrated beneath Black Bob, while Dan Keywood still lay in the edge of the slough, not yet recovered from that terrible kick.

The horse-tamer, though his pistol covered the old man, did not dare fire. He was thoroughly bewildered, and knew not what to do: so much so that he gave a sigh of relief when Walt leaped forward and knocked the revolver from his hand.

"Rope that critter!" cried the old man, as the wounded ruffian made a desperate dash for liberty.

Pedrillo obeyed without a word, his lasso plucking the fugitive from the edge of the bank over which he was scrambling. Five minutes later he, with Dan Keywood and the man overthrown by Pardon Goodman, were bound hand and foot.

"Now then, who in thunder are you, anyhow?" demanded Walt, as he firmly grasped the hand of the old man who had played such a curious part in the stirring events of the past twenty-four hours.

"You would have it that I was Black Bob-- and as Black Bob I managed to get you out of a pretty pickle," was the laughing reply. "But I like neither the name nor the reputation attached to it. You can call me Pardon Goodman for want of a better name."

"A good man you are, and I ask your pardon for the rough treatment--"

"Not a word, my boy. I'm only sorry that those rascals interfered. It would have been such a treat to have seen your father's face when you led me before him as Black Bob, bound hand and foot! But something always turns up to spoil my fun."

"If you really insist upon it," and Walt grinned at the idea, "it's not too late yet."

"No, the charm was broken when I had to show up in my true colors, or let you lose your money, if no worse. Anyway, I'll have the fun of telling the joke on you boys."

"You have honestly earned the right, and I, for one, am willing to grin and bear it. And now that we may sooner see the end of your masquerade, let's find out where these fellows have hidden their horses, and turn our faces homeward."

"Dinner first," interposed Ross, whose usual good appetite returned in full force, now that the storm-cloud had passed over.

Dan Keywood gave the desired information, though with an ill grace, and Pedrillo soon found the horses where they had been hidden in one of the wallows. Meantime Walt had been questioning Dan, while the brothers kindled a fire, and soon got at the bottom facts.

As soon as the herdsman learned that Harvey had sold a large drove of cattle to a government contractor, he resolved to make a bold strike for the moderate fortune, and getting paid off, he set out at once for River Bend. Once there he had no difficulty in securing allies, and it was at his orders that his men plied one of the herders with liquor until he gave the desired information: that the cattle had been paid for in cash. He, himself, had kept carefully out of sight, and no sooner was the desired knowledge gained than he set out to put his trap in order. He lay in wait until he saw which trail his intended victims had chosen, then, by dint of hard riding, gained their front and awaited their approach. A horse was driven into the slough and purposely mired, then shot. When Walt and his party came in sight, one of the men took his position beside the body, the rest hiding in one of the wallows. The result has already been recorded.

The three prisoners were bound upon their horses, the dead men being left where they fell, and the little cavalcade pressed on toward the ranch, which was reached just before noon of the next day.

Walt quickly explained the meaning of the bound men, and Uncle Frank had them taken

into the house and placed under guard. Then he insisted upon his sons telling the whole story, from the very first.

During this, the stranger sat smoking his pipe, his features almost invisible, thanks to his slouched hat and the cloud he was blowing, seemingly unconscious of the many interested glances cast toward him.

"You have him to thank for it all," concluded the young ranchero. "But for his quick wit and cool courage, you would have lost the money, if not a son."

Uncle Frank strode forward and pushed back the broad brim, gazing keenly into the eyes that were uplifted to his, while Pedrillo and the boys crowded around him with lively curiosity.

The ranchero started back with a low cry of surprise, and brushed a hand across his eyes, as though to clear his sight. The stranger uttered a short laugh. That was enough. The two men were locked in each other's arms, and capered around the room in that fashion like two boys fresh freed from school.

"Well, it's all very funny, no doubt, if a fellow could only understand what it means," at length uttered Walt, a little sharply.

"Introduce me, Frank—I've given so many names already, that he wouldn't believe me, alone."

"It's my brother—your uncle Dick—" began Harvey, but there he broke down, fairly sobbing with excess of joy.

"But—he's dead!" chorused the boys.

The scene that followed is not one for an

idle pen to dwell upon. Tears and laughter—broken speeches and spasmodic attempts at forced gaiety, followed by a long explanation, the substance only of which can be given here:

Richard Harvey was ever a rolling stone. A dozen years before it was reported that he died at sea. He wrote, contradicting the report, but his letters were lost. At length he resolved to hunt up his relatives, and hearing first of his brother Frank, hastened to Colorado. And this was their meeting!

Old as he was, uncle Dick was still a boy at heart, and many a glorious time did he, Walt, Ross, Arthur and Pedrillo have that winter, hunting and coursing. Antelope, wolf and jack-rabbit chasing formed a portion of the programme, and the boys, despite their disappointment on the morning after Pedrillo repaid Walt, by stealing their horses, were gratified by a taste of that most glorious of sports, a turkey hunt with horses and hounds. Then there was a winter hunt among the mountains and a taste of trapping for beaver and otter, all of which are well worthy of record, did not lack of space forbid.

Enough that Ross and Arthur returned home and to their studies in the spring, with a fresh supply of life and health, and many an interesting story to tell their mates.

If the reader has experienced one tithe of the enjoyment in reading, that they did in acting, the events which are hastily chronicled here, I am more than satisfied.

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